



LUVAH

JOURNAL OF THE CREATIVE IMAGINATION

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Cover image from John William Waterhouse's *The Lady of Shalott*

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**Part I**  
**Introduction**

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

*Farasha Euker*

Imagination is the star in man, the celestial or supercelestial body.<sup>1</sup>

IMAGINATION, or “Poetic Genius”,<sup>2</sup> in the terminology of William Blake, truly is the star in any human, though sadly it is a star that seems to be on its last days. It cannot be so, because the imagination is a faculty of the soul and the soul is indestructible, but a multitude of veils have covered the light that should be everyone’s imagination. This journal aims to recover the pristine imagination for a humanity dealing with the onslaught of modernity. Sacrifices must be made in one’s life, for one cannot fully devote one’s self to both the outer world and the inner world at the same time. We can only hope that this endeavor ignites a spark in the hearts of many a serious seeker, spurring them to choose the interior life as opposed to the worldly life.

*Luvah* is inherently interdisciplinary, dealing with such diverse topics as politics, international relations, literature, philosophy, and religion. Expect to see many views contrary to those you have been socialized to believe. Just as the Zen master must sometimes hit the student or insult the Buddha, our articles may, at times, shock our readers into profound “aha! moments”. We must explore our psyches in a Cartesian manner. Doubt can lead to the truth, just as in the case of Saint John’s dark night. This journal aims to expose the uninitiated to the Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, Christian, Jewish, Jain, and Islamic doctrines, while at the same time providing insights that may surprise or inspire the experienced academic and/or seeker. While we focus on intuitive ways of knowing in the religions, we are just as open to engaging with cutting-edge social theory. Ultimately, our perspective can be termed *philophantasia* (love of

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<sup>1</sup>Martin Ruland. *A Lexicon of Alchemy*. London: J.M. Watkins, 1964.

<sup>2</sup>William Blake. *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*. Ed. by David V. Erdman. New York: Anchor Books, 1988, p. 1.

imagination), and we are open to an engagement with all philosophies, religions, and thinkers, past, present, and future, that adore the life of the imagination. If one, and only one, shortcoming were to be pointed out about modernity, it may be the lack of intuition as a valid epistemological source.

As generally used, the term heterodox means deviance from the norm or any opinion or doctrine at variance with an official doctrine. Orthodox comes from the Greek word *orthodoxos* (ὀρθόδοξος) meaning having the right opinion. If you pay attention, you can see that these two terms—as generally used—are not mutually exclusive. We must never fall into the logical pitfall of assuming that just because a doctrine has more adherents or support in some official manner that it is correct. Within every faith there have been numerous marginal groups, groups driven to the edge of extinction, and victims of genocide. Some of the most heterodox groups and individuals were some of the most true, some of the most truly orthodox. Mansur Hallaj aimed not only to understand the truth, but to become the Truth. It is no accident that Hallaj was a Qarmati<sup>3</sup> sympathizer. It is no accident that Hallaj and Suhrawardi<sup>4</sup> met the same fate<sup>5</sup>. The ruling elites wanted to silence the truth and to banish it from this world, but truth is eternal. *Luvah* aims to present this truth to a wide and varied audience. If you read an article and it stimulates the opinion-producing part of your brain, please write to us and tell us your thoughts.

Running through the articles in this journal, one will notice certain influences and inspirations, including Plato, Simone Weil, William Blake, Ibn ‘Arabi, and William Morris. These are some of the editors’ favorites, but the journal is by no means limited to an exegesis of their writings. In the last fifty years, we have all lived in an intellectual wasteland. Our minds are turning into deserts. This journal is a contribution to the rebuilding of our collective cultures, which could become oases from modernity, which, hopefully, will grow and someday contribute to the “de-colonization of our minds”,<sup>6</sup> and the liberation of our souls from the torments imposed upon us by the instruments of the late-capitalist ideology. “Welcome to the desert of the real!”<sup>7</sup>

However much you feed a wolf, it always looks to the forest. We are all wolves of the dense forest of Eternity. —Marina Tsvetaeva<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>An early Ismaili sect of Islam that advocated the abolition of private property.

<sup>4</sup>Muslim philosopher and founder of the Ishraqi school of philosophy, which has been greatly important in the Eastern Islamic world.

<sup>5</sup>Execution.

<sup>6</sup>Ngugi Wa Thiong’o. *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. London: J. Currey, 1986.

<sup>7</sup>Slavoj Žižek. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!: Five Essays on 11 September and Related Dates*. London: Verso, 2002.

<sup>8</sup>Cited in Breyten Breytenbach. *Notes from the Middle World*. Haymarket Books, 2009, p. 95.

*Luvah* is important because it presents an alternative worldview that is staunchly opposed to those ideologies and forces that ensure that life in the modern world is strangely akin to living in the horrors of a sci-fi created alternate universe. What can one say, save for “the horror”? Humanity has divine and monstrous natures. The monstrous side has been referred to as an animal nature, but animals don’t kill, rape and destroy for fun. Some humans are above animals simply in their capacity to destroy. As such, dolphins could be said to have ethical superiority over humans. Perhaps dolphins should be our masters. Can we really consider ourselves superior to the animals? The human species is superior, can claim superiority for certain in one thing only: destructiveness. Animals are content to live their simple lives. They live happily in other realms. In the Islamic tradition, even the trees are said to praise God, but humans tend to forget. In some stories, even Satan was not a disbeliever or a hypocrite, but was simply a great monotheist who refused to bow before humans.<sup>9</sup> Look at what we have done over the past century. Now ask yourself, was Satan the arrogant one, or are we? The answer should be apparent. Humans are the one creature to forget the Divine. They fight against not only the Divine, but also the Earth, the animals, others of their species, their families, and even themselves with their radically self-destructive tendencies. Perhaps, it would not be such a surprise if the churches of today became shrines to a deity of the dollar tomorrow. Money is no longer real, but is virtual. We live in the world of reified capital taking the form of the concrete god that Nietzsche supposedly killed off long ago. The irony of the modern era is that while machines become more and more real we become more like things.<sup>10</sup> We must re-learn how to be. We must forget our socialization, our indoctrination. How? Look to the animals! Become a bird, floating to new heights you never before imagined. You will see that the less you have, the more you are. *Luvah* is not a wing that will help you take flight, but we may be the key that unlocks your cage, leading from the dark night of modernity to the light of truth.

I learned the grass as I began to write,  
And the grass started whistling like a flute.  
I gathered how color and sound could join  
And when the dragonfly whirred up his hymn,  
Passing through green frets like a comet, I knew  
A tear was waiting in each drop of dew.  
Knew that in each facet of the huge eye,  
In each rainbow of brightly churring wings,

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<sup>9</sup>See Jabez L. Van Cleef. *The Tawasin of Mansur Al-Hallaj*. CreateSpace, 2008.

<sup>10</sup>Paraphrasing Simone Weil. *Gravity and Grace*. London: Routledge, 2002, p. 153.

Dwells the burning word of the prophet—  
By some miracle I found Adam's secret.<sup>11</sup>

Truth is no longer valued in the modern world. We live in a virtual world; one in which all appearance has become reality, and all that was real is now simulated. Everything from our modes of transportation, to our patterns of language has become farther and farther removed from reality. "*Veritas numquam perit*"<sup>12</sup>, but in this decadent age it has, to the great detriment of all living beings. There is no postmodern era. What is so readily called the postmodern is in fact simply the hyper-modern. There is nothing whatsoever to justify classing ourselves in a new era. Ultimately, if you want to look at this through a simple lens there are only two eras: The traditional and the modern, represented visually through the use of an axis. The x axis represents the modern and the y axis represents the traditional. The traditional world sought to transcend this mundane existence through religion, art, philosophy, and architecture, hence the upward representation. The modern world is the opposite. Moderns deny all that is transcendent, even if it goes against the rationalism which they hold so dear. The future human is the cyborg, yet this is not postmodern. It is a fundamental mistake and a grave error to juxtapose the modern to the postmodern, thinking that one is better than the other, for they are both one in the same, only so-called postmodernism is the latest development in the modernist project. The world is in tatters, the environment in shambles, and life is quickly becoming unbearable. Solutions? Perhaps a radical re-education of all humans, similar to the re-education featured in *A Clockwork Orange*<sup>13</sup>. Oh yes, technology is so great that it cannot even solve the problems that would not exist without modern technology. We have so much more today than any previous generation, yet one important thing is missing: Happiness! Perhaps, it is time to radically revise what we mean by culture. Looking around, one fails to see anything civilized about civilization. The places of mass congregation, far from being centers of enlightenment, are, in fact, bastions of barbarism.

Service to a homeless person is service to God, yet the way of action is in no sense ideal; it is only necessary because of the corrupted nature of the world. Ideally we would all be solitary gnostics, striving for Nirvana. It is interesting to note how backwards things seem to be in this world. The only truly Marxist revolution was the anti-

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<sup>11</sup>Arseny Tarkovsky. *I Learned the Grass as I Began to Write*. Homepage—Center for the Art of Translation. July 2012. URL: <http://catranslation.org/i-learned-the-grass-as-i-began-to-write>.

<sup>12</sup>Truth never dies.

<sup>13</sup>I am stating this sardonically, though it is possible that oppressive education needs equally oppressive re-education.

Marxist revolution in Poland.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps the best way to save the world is not by acting, but by following the Daoist principle of wu-wei<sup>15</sup>. Perhaps we should follow the dictum attributed to Gandhi that we must “be the change we wish to see in the world.”<sup>16</sup> For a thinking person, the divine Name must be all-important. By withdrawing into our selves and nourishing our souls through the Name, we may begin to embody the attributes of the One in this realm of contingency. How could we try to save the world, if we ourselves need saving? First we must become the microcosmic reflection of all that is good, and in this process we become like beacons of light, shining as examples for all to see and emulate. Just think of it: if even a small percentage of the world’s population begins to focus on Truth, Beauty, and Goodness, they will no longer practice violence and conspicuous consumption and will embody attributes such as compassion (*ar-Rahman*) in their daily lives. If we want to change the world through violence, we ourselves will become violent creatures who could not help but repeat the atrocities of the last century. On the other hand, if we are non-violent—even to the animals, compassionate, and full of love for all creatures, we could not help but be generous and compassionate. Perhaps quietism is the best way after all. All who read this should find time to spend in the refuge of nature, the greatest and most universal of all revelations.

Life on this planet isn’t as agreeable as it could be. Something obviously went wrong on Spaceship Earth, but what? [...] [S]omebody must have started playing around with seeds and plants and invented agriculture. It seemed to be a good idea[...] [b]ut life became more complicated, and toilsome.<sup>17</sup>

Everything changes! We are both essentially the same as we always were and fully different from a few days before. *Luvah* is a dividing line, an invisible line in the sand, stretching across the expansive deserts that are our lives. The past is the past, but it also is the future, for the future would be nothing without the past. Are we free? Can we shape our own destiny? I no longer know, but *Luvah* will ask these questions, and sometimes questions are more important than answers. Perhaps the past is a weight around our necks holding us too closely to the ground and not allowing us to fly freely. We are candles, flames, and butterflies. Just like a burning candle we retain

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<sup>14</sup>The ‘Arab Spring may be another example, though it seems to have been co-opted by reactionaries.

<sup>15</sup>Non-acting action.

<sup>16</sup>It is doubtful Gandhi stated these exact words, though they do epitomize his life’s work and principles.

<sup>17</sup>p.m. *bolo’bolo*. New York: Semiotext(e), 1985, pp. 1-2.

our essences, though the accidents surrounding our beings may change. The Buddhist and Hindu views are equally true, being two sides of the same Truth, for the eternity and indivisibility of the soul, and change, suffering, and impermanence are equally real. As the Buddha states, “Life is suffering,”<sup>18</sup> but, is suffering to be our destiny? Perhaps the horizontal dimension must always be the dimension of pain, but that is not all there is. There is a vertical dimension from which we can cut the chains that bind us, setting our souls free to fly onward and upward. *Luvah* is a cartography of the self to the Self. Nothing is as it seems: the good is the bad and the bad is the good, and in the end we are all alone in the universe until we meet the One. We are not angels to rely solely upon God for help; we are humans, deeply flawed creatures left to fend for ourselves—and judging by the state of society, we are doing a terrible job—in this world. Liberation is in the palm of our hands, salvation is within us, and “God is closer than our jugular veins” (Qur’an L, 16), but our future is our own responsibility, and society’s future is our collective responsibility. When Sartre stated that “Hell is—other people,”<sup>19</sup> he had a point. Heaven is easily attained for one who only talks to the animals and trees, but we live in a world of people and they tend to drag us down.<sup>20</sup> That is part of the test, for evil exists on this planet only because people exist on this planet, and capitalism seems to magnify that evil, so in these times one must be a saint merely to maintain a shred of goodness. Can we have a new revolution, one without guns or harm to any living being, a goodness revolution, where all humans treat all other humans (and other living beings) with the respect they deserve? Failing this, we are alone. Let us have revolutions of one, or a few, then create autonomous zones where equality, dignity, and respect for all living creatures are the paramount values. Let us return to the search for Truth, Beauty, and Goodness in a world filled with lies, ugliness, and evil. And if I am to be alone in this search, in this resurrection of such antiquated ideals, then so be it. I can seek the Real in a solitary form just as Milarepa and the great mystics of the past sought the Real.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps we can save ourselves. Let the search begin with *Luvah*.

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<sup>18</sup>The first noble truth.

<sup>19</sup>Cited in Adrian Hoven and Andrew N. Leak. *Sartre Today: A Centenary Celebration*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2005, p. 169.

<sup>20</sup>Though some, such as our loved ones and spiritual guides, may do quite the opposite!

<sup>21</sup>In the Islamic tradition even those alone can rely on Khidr, the *Green Man*, for guidance.

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**Part II**  
**Editorials**

## Chapter 2

# Deep Traditionalism or How to Heal the World

*Farasha Euker*

Socialism and communism of the West are based on certain conceptions which are fundamentally different from ours. One such conception is their belief in the essential selfishness of human nature. I do not subscribe to it for I know that the former can respond to the call of the spirit in him, can rise superior to the passions that he owns in common with the brute and, therefore, superior to selfishness and violence, which belong to the brute nature and not to the immortal spirit of man. Our socialism or communism should, therefore, be based on nonviolence and on harmonious co-operation of labor and capital, landlord and tenant.<sup>1</sup>

Historically, leftist ideologies, such as Marxism and anarchism, tended towards future centrism. They advocated the further mechanization of the means of production, including the human body. Despite this, some dissenting authors, such as Fredy Perlman, Pierre Clastres, David Watson, and Jacques Camatte, have kept some of the political goals of the classic left, while shifting the focus to environmental issues, and even criticizing the foundations, not only of modernity, but of post-agricultural civilization. Clastres' anthropological writings dispel some widely held misconceptions about *primitive* societies, and Perlman, Watson, and Camatte all advocate a returning to previous modes of *be-ing*. Despite this, much of *green* anarchism is still based upon Enlightenment ideas and ideals. A spiritual, environmentally aware, and queer friendly activism must have deep philosophical foundations. Some of the best places

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<sup>1</sup>Mahatma Gandhi. *The Communist Creed*. Gandhi Book Centre. July 2012. URL: <http://www.mkgandhi.org/momgandhi/chap52.htm>.

to begin unearthing these foundations are the writings of William Morris, William Blake, Spinoza, Gandhi, and Arne Naess. The Deep Ecology movement in particular, is one of a small number of movements with a similar outlook. The importance of this doctrine—almost an immanent unitary theology—is principally derived from Spinoza and Buddhism, though Ibn ‘Arabi and Jacob Boehme could easily enrich the doctrine a great deal. Why is such a doctrine—a radical re-thinking of all that Western culture holds dear—important? Children are our future, but children are often left alone by their parents to play mind-destroying video games, then after those games destroy their thought patterns, they take medications that put them in a box and force them into a life of mediocrity. The best and brightest were, after all, always characterized with labels such as *deviant*, *insane*, or *freak*. Any society that treats its children in such a manner is ripe for change.

Communism puts an end to castes, classes and the division of labor (onto which was grafted the movement of value, which in turn animates and exalts this division). Communism is first of all union. It is not domination of nature but reconciliation, and thus regeneration of nature: human beings no longer treat nature simply as an object for their development, as a useful thing, but as a subject (not in the philosophic sense) not separate from them if only because nature is in them. The naturalization of man and the humanization of nature (Marx) are realized: the dialectic of subject and object ends. Revolution can no longer be taken to mean just the destruction of all that is old and conservative, because capital has accomplished this itself. Rather, it will appear as a return to something (a revolution in the mathematical sense of the term), a return to community, though not in any form which has existed previously. Revolution will make itself felt in the destruction of all that which is most modern and progressive (because science is capital). Another of its manifestations will involve the re-appropriation of all those aspects and qualities of life which have still managed to affirm that which is human. In attempting to grasp what this tendency means, we cannot be aided by any of the old dualistic, Manichean categories. (It is the same tendency which in the past had held back the valorization process in its movement towards a situation of complete autonomy.) If the triumph of communism is to bring about the creation of humanity, then it requires that this creation be possible, it must be a desire which has been there all the time, for centuries.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Jacques Camatte. *The Wandering of Humanity*. Marxists Internet Archive. July 2012. URL: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/camatte/wanhum/>.

The best metaphysical foundation for such a rethinking is, perhaps, a *transcendent-immanent* ontology and cosmology. Without transcendence, there can be no-thing, but without immanence, there can be no connection to the Divine. Meister Eckhart, Shankara, and Ibn ‘Arabi were all adherents of the *transcendent-immanent* and monist perspectives. Pluralism is a veil, an illusion, or *maya* in the terminology of the Vedantins. “And God’s is the east and the west: and wherever you turn, there is God’s countenance. Behold, God is infinite, all-knowing” (Qur’an II, 115). If God is everywhere, then why is the environment being destroyed? The answer is the loss of the *sense of the sacred*, both individually and as a society. This is why secular environmentalist projects are doomed to failure. The degree of environmental destruction in the Soviet Union may have been due to the communal view of property as not really belonging to anyone. If, however, God owns all property, and one deeply believes in that deity, then environmental consciousness should increase to the level of a good house-guest who takes care of property that is not theirs and whose owner is just and will take one to account for each act of carelessness. But the masses continue to desecrate the planet, destroying nature wherever it exists in a pure and untouched form. Even people who are not directly involved in the destruction of this planet are implicitly to blame for their complicity in the systems of thought and action that continue to do harm. If one knows that the creation of a product involves exploitation of child labor, the destruction of old growth forests, or the production of toxic waste, why do they continue to buy it? The simple answer is most likely *convenience*. Poverty is wrong, war is wrong, and violence in all of its nefarious manifestations, is morally unjustifiable, therefore, inconvenient as it may be, one should never directly or indirectly support a system, government, or product that is a result of or results in any of the above. Many see religion as a form of oppression, but it is not the essence of a faith that is oppressive, but an *accidental* framework that may have grown up around that faith. The materialism in Marxism was its accident, while its emphasis on social justice was its substance, just as the inquisition was accidental to the substance of Christianity. All true religions are, at their core, socialist and environmentalist, though not necessarily in the way those terms are currently meant. Greedy usurpers of power later warped religion to fit their needs. The incessant desire for power that led to so many travesties, meant that the small number of faiths that did not deviate from their original principles were obliterated from the face of this planet. The true core of religion is still there for all who are willing to open their eyes. Social justice should be a microcosm of divine justice.

In societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life is presented as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation.<sup>3</sup>

One school of thought that has, perhaps, the greatest potential to realize the above is the traditionalist school. Some brief clarifications are in order, due to the common misconceptions surrounding tradition in general and traditionalism in particular. Tradition can be defined as *praxis* toward the Divine, and those sets of doctrines and practices, which are imbued with the spirit of the Divine. This is not limited to any one particular time or place. The present could theoretically be just as traditional as the past. A common mistake is to conflate tradition with the past, which is wrong in principal, though often correct. Theoretically, a work of philosophy, art, music, or architecture created tomorrow could be just as traditional as a work from a thousand years ago. Ultimately, the qualifications would be whether the creator was a vessel for the Divine and that the purpose of creation was to lead others to the transcendent realms of the imagination. Traditionalism tries to recreate a situation in which a thousand Fra Angelico's could bloom. Strange as it may sound, Nietzsche, Deleuze, Heidegger, and other modern thinkers can be of use to traditionalists. Henry Corbin, for instance, used Heidegger's concepts a great deal in his writings. Even Baudrillard had something of importance to say. These individuals can help us criticize modernity and so-called post-modernity. They can help us to understand the world's current malaise and, perhaps, can offer us solutions to get out of that malaise. One does not read Heidegger or Deleuze in order to understand how to pray, but reads them in order to have a critical understanding of the structures of late capitalist ideology and society. With such a critical understanding, one can be better prepared to make astute criticisms, educate the proletariat about their mistakes, and offer ways forward. Sartre and Deleuze may not contribute to tradition as such, but they certainly can contribute to traditionalism, even if only through their strong critical apparatus.

Who built Thebes of the seven gates?  
In the books you will find the names of kings.  
Did the kings haul up the lumps of rock?  
And Babylon, many times demolished  
Who raised it up so many times? In what houses  
of gold-glittering Lima did the builders live?  
Where, the evening that the Wall of China was finished  
Did the masons go? Great Rome

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<sup>3</sup>Guy Debord. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Trans. by Ken Knabb. Rebel Press, 2005, p. 11.

Is full of triumphal arches. Who erected them? Over whom  
Did the Caesars triumph? Had Byzantium, much praised in song  
Only palaces for its inhabitants? Even in fabled Atlantis  
The night the ocean engulfed it  
The drowning still bawled for their slaves.<sup>4</sup>

We must read deeply and widely, including the Daoist canon, Gandhi, Aurobindo, Buddhadasa Bhikku, Shariati, Tolstoy, and Jacques Ellul. All of these figures lived a relatively simple lifestyle, and all were spiritual socialists, focused on creating a more just society. No government is inherently traditional. Even the best government can only foster tradition, whereas the worst governments sow the seeds of decadent materialism into their population's hearts. Capitalism and communism as existing are both poor governments in this regard. It is difficult for one to focus on the Absolute when one cannot find enough food to eat. One of the names of God in Islam is the *Just*. As the microcosm of the Divine, it is humanity's responsibility not only to follow spiritual principles, but to embody all of the attributes of God. As such, we should be just, merciful, and compassionate in all aspects of our lives, from our daily encounters at our workplace to the way we treat a bug we find in our homes. All living things are sacred, and all deserve to be treated with the respect due to a creation of something much higher than our minds can possibly comprehend.

I wander thro' each charter'd street,  
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow,  
And mark in every face I meet  
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man,  
In every Infants cry of fear,  
In every voice, in every ban,  
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear.

How the Chimney-sweeper's cry  
Every black'ning Church appalls;  
And the hapless Soldier's sigh  
Runs in blood down Palace walls.

But most thro' midnight streets I hear

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<sup>4</sup>David Levine. *Reproducing Families: The Political Economy of English Population History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 6.

How the youthful Harlot's curse  
Blasts the new-born Infant's tear  
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.<sup>5</sup>

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**Part III**  
**Articles**

## Chapter 3

# Lovers of Sophia: Śri Ramakrishna and Muhyi al-Din ibn ‘Arabi

*Zachary Markwith*

When one looks at the lives of some of the greatest sages and exponents of Divine Unity and religious pluralism in the history of Islam and other traditions, a curious and reoccurring phenomenon is often present: namely, a celestial or earthly feminine manifestation of Divine wisdom or *sophia*. In this article<sup>1</sup> we examine love and devotion to a feminine theophany of the Divine in the lives and teachings of Śri Ramakrishna and Muhyi al-Din ibn ‘Arabi, keeping in mind from the outset that there is not an exact one-to-one correlation between the Goddess in Hinduism and the earthly reflection of the Beloved in the lives of the Sufis. Ramakrishna worshipped the Hindu Goddess Kali, while Ibn ‘Arabi saw the Persian girl Nizam as a symbol of the Infinite and Absolute Reality that is beyond forms, yet is also the Source of all sacred forms. Remarkably, both sages were able to appreciate other religions after witnessing a manifestation or symbol of Divine majesty and beauty in the feminine form. While Ramakrishna and Ibn ‘Arabi came from different religious, historical, and cultural contexts they arrived at a strikingly similar understanding of the universality of religions through contemplating God through the form of the feminine. We believe that this was not an accident, but a reoccurring theme in the lives and teachings of many mystics because the feminine theophany is a direct manifestation or reflection of the infinitude of God, the knowledge of which makes all sacred forms intelligible. It was a beatific vision of the Infinite through the feminine that enabled Ramakrishna and Ibn ‘Arabi to appreciate, albeit in different ways, the various sacred forms that they encountered as so many “unique repetitions” of Divine wisdom and beauty.

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### 3.1 Śri Ramakrishna

Śri Ramakrishna (1836-1886) also known as *paramahansa* or “the Great Swan,” was born in the village Kumarpukur in Bengal.<sup>2</sup> He was devoted to the Hindu Goddess Kali and other Hindu deities and avatars, but also expressed his love and devotion to the Divine Reality or Brahman through sacred forms from other religious universes, which are not always seen as alien forms in Hinduism. One can in fact trace this universal understanding of religious forms in Hinduism to what in Sanskrit is termed *sanatana dharma* or the eternal teaching, which has also been translated as perennial wisdom or *sophia perennis*.<sup>3</sup> Ramakrishna has become known in the West mostly through the text *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* by his disciple Mahendranath Gupta, as well as the popular devotional centers established by another disciple Vivekananda.<sup>4</sup> The following analysis will rely primarily on Ramakrishna’s own experiences and teachings, as well as contemporary secondary sources, which help to elucidate the meaning of his life, teachings and practices in the context of nineteenth century India.

Regarding the place of the Goddess in Hinduism, Alf Hiltebeitel and Kathleen Erndl observe,

Of all the world’s great religions Hinduism has the most elaborate living Goddess traditions. Hindu conceptions of female deities and the overarching Great Goddess stem from the supreme cosmic power, *Shakti*, from whom all creation emerges and by whom it is sustained. The worship of the Goddess, of the divine as female, has a long history in India and continues to become more popular today. By virtue of their common feminine nature, women are in some contexts regarded as special manifestations of the Goddess, sharing in her powers...<sup>5</sup>

Beginning in 1855, Ramakrishna served as a priest in a Kali temple in Dakshineswar.<sup>6</sup> Ramakrishna was first and foremost devoted to the Divine Mother or the Goddess Kali, which means black or dark colored. As the consort of Shiva, Kali is the *adya-shakti* or the primordial power. Along with other deities in the Hindu Pantheon, Shiva and Kali manifest the masculine and feminine principles of existence or

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<sup>2</sup>I.H. Azad Faruqi. *Sufism and Bhakti: Mawlana Rum and Śri Ramakrishna*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1984, p. 69.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Alf Hiltebeitel and Kathleen M. Erndl. *Is the Goddess a Feminist?* Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000, p. 11.

<sup>6</sup>Faruqi, *Sufism and Bhakti: Mawlana Rum and Śri Ramakrishna*, pp. 70-71.

*purusha* and *prakriti*. Kali is associated with destruction and renewal, which are symbols for spiritual annihilation and absorption in the Divine. For devotees of Kali, the Divine Mother is not simply an external deity to be worshipped among other deities, but a manifestation of the Divine Essence, as well as the creative energy that generates and destroys forms. Kali is often depicted as black, which symbolizes the mystery and blinding luminosity of the Divine Essence. Ramakrishna states,

Brahman alone is addressed as the Mother. This is because a mother is an object of great love. One is able to realize God just through love. Ecstasy of feeling, devotion, love, and faith—these are the means.<sup>7</sup>

The devotees of the Goddess often see Her as transcending other deities, such as Shiva and Vishnu in power and beauty. It becomes clear from Ramakrishna's life and teachings, however, that each Divine manifestation is a unique expression of the same Reality, as well as a state of being which corresponds to a level of realization in the sage.<sup>8</sup> This was true for Ramakrishna when he was contemplating Hindu deities and avatars, as well as Divine theophanies and prophets from other religions. Ramakrishna's devotion to each of these particular forms are all expressions of his unitive vision of God.<sup>9</sup> The forms and substance of the numerous deities in Hinduism are comparable, in certain respects, to the Ninety-Nine Names of God in the Islamic tradition. In Islam, all of these Names are aspects of Supreme Name and Reality Allah, just as Hindu deities are manifestations of the Supreme Principle Brahman. Kali is in some ways analogous to the Divine Name *al-Rahman* or the Infinitely Good in Islam, although She also has a fierce and majestic side. Kali also manifests in the world through a variety of forms, especially through women of great sanctity. If Hinduism appears to be more explicit about the immanence of the Divine and the manifestation of God through the human form, we discover below that this aspect and understanding of God is by no means absent in Islam.

Ramakrishna saw many women in his life, including children, complete strangers, and even prostitutes, as manifestations of the Goddess Kali or another feminine deity

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<sup>7</sup>M.N. Gupta. *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. Ramakrishna Mission, 1912, p. 108.

<sup>8</sup>René Guénon. *The Multiple States of the Being*. Trans. by Henry D. Fohr. Hillsdale, New York: Sophia Perennis, 2004.

<sup>9</sup>Ramakrishna states, "A single sense perception of Brahman, no less than a beatific vision of the Divine Face. The opening of a single flower is Brahman, no less than the unfolding of the constellations. Boundless Consciousness, without separate subjects or objects, miraculously manifests as materiality. You may wonder how Atman—sheer awareness and transparency—can appear as what one senses to be impenetrable earth and stone. To clear this and every doubt, simply remember that Divine Presence is capable of any manifestation whatsoever. God will never be limited by what people perceive as the bounds of possibility, no matter how expanded their relative knowledge may become." Lex Hixon. *Great Swan: Meetings with Ramakrishna*. Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1992, p. 180.

in Hinduism. This form of adoration of women is called *shorashi puja* in Tantra.<sup>10</sup> Regarding his marriage to the famous female Hindu saint Sarada Devi (1853-1920), Ramakrishna relates:

After several years of ecstasy, when I was twenty-three, my beloved earthly mother arranged my marriage to Sarada in order to shock this mind into some worldly responsibility, but I experienced the five-year old bride as a complete manifestation of the Universal Mother in Her delicate wisdom-aspect as Goddess Sarasvati.<sup>11</sup>

Ramakrishna was concerned how his young bride could “survive the painful social pressures of being married to a homeless *paramahansa* with no worldly sensibility whatsoever.”<sup>12</sup> He goes on to say:

When Sarada finally came to visit me here at the Temple Garden—sixteen years of age and beautiful with a transcendent Divine Beauty—I no longer worried. Why? Because I perceived that she is a full conscious manifestation of the Goddess... Such power to assimilate Divine Ecstasy—and to conceal from others her constant ecstatic experience—I have never encountered in any practitioner, before or since.<sup>13</sup>

Ramakrishna’s primary and central form of devotion was to the Goddess and Her various manifestations, yet in a manner similar to Ibn ‘Arabi, Ramakrishna did not see the feminine theophany as a form that excluded other forms. Rather, he saw the Divine Mother as a symbol or manifestation of the Divine Essence and the creative aspect of God. For Ramakrishna the Divine feminine is the Infinite fount of all Divine Self-disclosures, as well as his own celestial spiritual guide. According to I.H. Azad Faruqi,

To the question whether Śri Ramakrishna wanted to be guided on this path [of Advaita Vedanta] Śri Ramakrishna replied that this depended

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<sup>10</sup>It should be noted that Ramakrishna appears to venerate all women in his life, including his wife, in a Platonic manner and according to his monastic vow of celibacy. Likewise, his practice of Tantra was purely symbolic and contemplative without the concomitant sexual dimensions. Claude Alan Stark, *God of All, Sri Ramakrishna’s Approach to Religious Plurality* (Cape Cod, MA: Claude Stark, Inc., 1974), pp. 42-51, 112-122. Gupta, *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 37.

<sup>11</sup>Hixon, *Great Swan: Meetings with Ramakrishna*, p. 85.

<sup>12</sup>Hixon, *op. cit.*, pp. 85-86.

<sup>13</sup>Hixon, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

on the will of Mother Kali. As he received permission from Her he was all set for his new experiment in spirituality.<sup>14</sup>

From Kali, Ramakrishna was given unique permission to practice various Hindu forms and many of the world's great religions that he encountered, including Advaita Vedanta, Tantra, Vaishnavism, Christianity and Islam. Moreover, he was responsible for asserting the essential unity of the supreme mystical experience in these religions, which he became aware of through reaching the end of each path he embarked on.<sup>15</sup> If Śrī Ramana Maharshi (d. 1950) was providentially chosen to bear witness to the primacy of the Self in contemporary India, Ramakrishna's unique function was to practice various traditional forms and remind us that they each lead to realization of the same Divine Reality. Ramakrishna states,

I have always considered religious one-sidedness to be the major obstacle to such awakening [in Atman or Brahman]. Therefore, I have sought and received countless sacred teachings. In the holy Vrindavan I was initiated as a Vaishnava monk, wearing traditional robes, imbibing and entirely assimilating that particular mystic atmosphere. At the Temple Golden in Dakshineswar I was initiated into the mystery of Rama worship, painting my forehead with sandalwood paste and wearing a diamond amulet

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<sup>14</sup>“At their first meeting, when Tota Puri inquired of Śrī Ramakrishna if he wished to practice the Advaita Vedanta sadhana, for he seemed well qualified to the wandering monk, Śrī Ramakrishna replied, ‘Wait, I’ll ask my Mother. It all depends on her.’ He returned a little later in a semiconscious state and beaming with joy. He told Tota Puri that Divine Mother has instructed him, ‘Go and learn—it was to teach you that the monk came here.’” God of All, p. 62. After practicing Advaita Vedanta for six months and attaining the highest level of realization, Kali intervenes and tells Ramakrishna, “Remain on the threshold of relative consciousness for the sake of humanity.” Ibid., p. 66. See also, Ibid., pp. 45, 100. Faruqi, *Sufism and Bhakti: Mawlana Rum and Śrī Ramakrishna*, p. 78.

<sup>15</sup>Christopher Isherwood writes, “One result of experiencing nivikalpa samadhi was that Ramakrishna became even more catholic in his views and felt keen sympathy for any and every sect which sincerely struggled to know God. At this time, a certain Govinda Rai came to Dakshineswar; he was a Hindu of the kshatriya caste by birth, but, as a seeker after truth, he had studied many religions and had finally embraced Islam... Ramakrishna happened to talk with him and was charmed by his faith and love of God. ‘This also is a path to God-realization,’ Ramakrishna said to himself. ‘The Mother has shown herself to many people through this sadhana also. I must practice it.’... Saradananda finds great significance in Ramakrishna’s practice of Islam. He believes that Ramakrishna wished to demonstrate by it that non-dualistic Vedanta is the only valid link between the many dualistic religions. It is certainly idle to pretend, as some well-intentioned liberals do, that there is very little difference between religions, or races. There is a very big difference—on the surface. Unity can only be found by going deep, to the underlying, all-projecting Brahman.” Christopher Isherwood. *Ramakrishna and His Disciples*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965, pp. 124-125.

around my neck. In both instances, after three days these outer expressions no longer seemed appropriate, as the inner power of the initiation had fully blossomed. With the same wholehearted spirit, I practiced the ways of Christianity and Islam, each for a period of three days of total intensity, during which these particular mystic ideals came to full and permanent fruition in my being. No genuine initiation ever disappears. But now I have become a vat that can dye cloth whatever primary color or subtle hue anyone may desire. All the most advanced spiritual experiences from human history are contained in the form now before you, as in a transparent case. I swear to you that I know nothing but God!<sup>16</sup>

After traveling through several different traditions, Ramakrishna was able to know—through direct experience—that all paths lead to the same Divine summit.<sup>17</sup> In a lecture entitled “Sri Ramakrishna and Religious Tolerance” Ananda K. Coomaraswamy remarks, “Such an understanding may be rare, but is absolutely normal in the East...”<sup>18</sup> Ramakrishna states, “The Reality is one and the same; the difference is in name and form...some address the Reality as ‘Allah’, some as ‘God’, some as ‘Brahman’, some as ‘Kali’, and others by such names as ‘Rama’, ‘Jesus’, ‘Durga’, ‘Hari’.”<sup>19</sup> Ramakrishna was also sensitive to religious differences, and was careful to only practice one traditional form at a time.

Due to the fact that we are comparing Ramakrishna to Ibn ‘Arabi, it is important to more closely examine Ramakrishna’s brief but profound experience as a Muslim and his initiation at the hands of a Sufi shaykh in 1866. In his own words, Ramakrishna states:

I received initiation and instruction from the Sufi Master Govinda Rai. He transmitted to my heart the beautiful Divine Name Allah, which I then repeated with every breath. I visited the small mosque behind the Temple Garden, learning to make the call to prayer and to perform *namaz*, the graceful cycles of prostration and praise offered by devout Muslims five times every day. My practice of Islam was crowned by a vision of the noble Prophet Muhammad—a robed, dignified, bearded figure of supreme sanctity—who merged intimately with my being, pervading

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<sup>16</sup>Hixon, *Great Swan: Meetings with Ramakrishna*, p. 289.

<sup>17</sup>Ananda K. Coomaraswamy. “Paths that Lead to the Same Summit”. In: *The Bugbear of Literacy*. Dobson, 1947, pp. 50-67.

<sup>18</sup>Ananda K. Coomaraswamy. “Sri Ramakrishna and Religious Tolerance”. In: *Prabuddha Bharata* 41 (1936).

<sup>19</sup>Gupta, *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 135.

my body with rose fragrance and lifting my awareness into union with him and then into mystic union with Allah Most High. It was precisely the same profound *samadhi* attained along the paths of Veda and Tantra. Muslims call it *fana*. During this brief but intense period of Islamic *sadhana*, I enjoyed Muslim dishes and wore Muslim clothes. I removed the pictures of Hindu deities from my room and constantly chanted verses in Arabic from the Holy Quran...<sup>20</sup>

What is striking about his practice of Islam and other traditions is that he completely dedicated himself to each tradition that he set his heart and mind to until he reached its highest level of realization. He did not practice the rites or features of one tradition alongside those of another, but fully lived and worshipped within each religion that he practiced. Moreover, he did not allow all of his disciples to practice all of the traditions that he did.<sup>21</sup> According to Faruqi, “There is no doubt however that whatever discipline he practiced he always returned to the Mother Goddess as his beloved ideal.”<sup>22</sup> Moreover, Kali directed Ramakrishna to practice the various forms he dedicated himself to and consecrated his efforts. He states, “When I took up a particular *sadhana* and asked Divine Mother importunately with a glowing eagerness of heart for the realization of its result, She benignly crowned me with success in three days only.”<sup>23</sup> Ramakrishna demonstrates that the bhaktic or devotional way in Hinduism contains an opening to gnosis. His devotion to the Divine Mother and Her various manifestations opened him to the highest level of realization in Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam.

### 3.2 Muhyi al-Din ibn ‘Arabi

Muhyi al-Din ibn ‘Arabi (1165-1240), known as the Greatest Master (*al-Shaykh al-Akbar*) in many Sufi circles, was born in Murcia during Muslim rule of the Iberian Peninsula. He is best known for his treatises *The Ringstones of Wisdom* (*Fusus al-hikam*) and *The Meccan Openings* (*al-Futuh al-makkiyyah*), and the famous poem *The Interpreter of Desires* (*Tarjuman al-ashwaq*), which is central to this discussion due to the young Persian woman Nizam who inspired the work. Below we look at how Ibn ‘Arabi’s theophanic vision of Nizam helped to inspire his universal vision of

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<sup>20</sup>Hixon, *Great Swan: Meetings with Ramakrishna*, pp. 255-256.

<sup>21</sup>Faruqi, *Sufism and Bhakti: Mawlana Rumi and Sri Ramakrishna*, pp. 77-78.

<sup>22</sup>Faruqi, op. cit., p. 79.

<sup>23</sup>Claude Alan Stark. *God of All, Sri Ramakrishna’s Approach to Religious Plurality*. Cape Cod, MA: Claude Stark, Inc., 1974, p. 47.

Divine Unity and religious diversity. Ibn ‘Arabi’s understanding of love and devotion (*mahabbah*) was not separate from gnosis or illumination (*ma‘rifah*). If the paths of action, love, and gnosis are more strictly differentiated in Hinduism, they are seen as complementary in Islamic esoterism. While Ibn ‘Arabi was first and foremost a gnostic, his poem the *Tarjuman al-ashwaq* demonstrates that his contemplative vision of Reality was based on love. Conversely, if Rumi is often seen as the supreme expositor of love in Islam, his *Mathnawi* demonstrates that Divine love is actually a form of gnosis. In both cases one can assert that either love or gnosis is the dominant theme, but that neither are absent. As such, we have chosen to highlight Ibn ‘Arabi’s perspective on love and devotion with the understanding that this love is inseparable from the knowledge of God.

Before we examine the role of Nizam in the life of Ibn ‘Arabi it is necessary to say a few words about love and devotion in Islam and Sufism in general. According to the Islamic tradition, God has Ninety-Nine Names, which are either Names of Majesty (*Jalal*), Beauty (*Jamal*), or Perfection (*Kamal*). These Names are the quintessence of the Quranic revelation, the invocation of which leads to the recollection of the Named. The first category includes Names such as the Just (*al-‘Adl*), the All-Powerful (*al-Qadir*), and the Avenger (*al-Muntaqim*), while the second category refers to Names such as the Infinitely Good (*al-Rahman*) the Peace (*al-Salam*), and the Loving (*al-Wadud*), and the third category of Names includes the Truth (*al-Haqq*), the Light (*al-Nur*), and the One (*al-Ahad*), which are beyond every duality.<sup>24</sup> In the context of this subject, knowledge of the second category of Divine Names represents the pinnacle of Divine love in Islam, with the understanding that the Names of Majesty and Perfection are also inseparable from the Names of Beauty and ultimately the Divine Essence.<sup>25</sup> In Islam, the Names of Beauty have a certain primacy over the Names of Majesty, which is indicated by the sacred formula that begins all but one

<sup>24</sup>Seyyed Hossein Nasr. *The Heart of Islam*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2002, pp. 4-5.

<sup>25</sup>Claude Addas writes, “Ibn ‘Arabi concludes the scriptural argumentation of this introductory paragraph by mentioning a series of akhbar, “traditions” attributed to the Prophet. I shall only reiterate one, due to the great significance it has within the Akbarian doctrine of love, “God is beautiful,” the Envoy of God declared, “and He loves beauty.” This hadith is in fact ubiquitous in Ibn ‘Arabi’s writings on love (including this chapter (178) of the *Futuhat*)—whether he refers to it explicitly, or discreetly alludes to it—so indissociable are these two notions of love and beauty for him. It is true that Imam Ghazzali accords equally great importance to this subject in the long chapter of the *Ihya’ ‘ulum al-din* entitled *Kitab al-mahabbah*. However, for him beauty is only one cause (*sahab*) of love among others; for Ibn ‘Arabi it is the primary and inexhaustible source. Therefore, he replies without a hint of hesitation to Tirmidhi’s one hundred and eighteenth question: “Where does love come from” by saying, “From his epiphany in the Name al-Jamil.” Claude Addas. “The Experience and Doctrone of Love in Ibn ‘Arabi”. In: *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society* 32 (2002).

of the chapters of the *Qur'an*, “In the Name of God—the Infinitely Good, the All-Merciful” (*Bismi’Llah al-Rahman al-Rahim*), the verse, “He has prescribed Mercy for Himself” (6:12), and the *hadith qudsi* that is written on the Divine Throne, “Verily My Mercy precedeth My Wrath.”<sup>26</sup> It is also necessary to state that Ibn ‘Arabi was devoted to the One alone and identified the Divine Essence with the name *al-Rahman* — a name etymologically related to the Arabic word for womb (*rahim*).<sup>27</sup> His primary forms of devotion were the same forms that all Muslims use to worship and know the ineffable and ubiquitous Divine Reality—Allah—such as the five daily prayers, fasting, and the recitation of the *Qur'an*, including the Names of God in Arabic. Through the intimacy with God that he gained through following the Law (*Shari‘ah*) and the spiritual path (*tariqah*) of Islam, he was able to recognize the Names and signs of God in and beyond creation.

In Ibn ‘Arabi’s sacred cosmology and anthropology, all of creation is a reflection of one or more of the Divine Names, while the One who is Named transcends the cosmos and man. It is therefore possible and even necessary to see reflections of Divine majesty and beauty in creation, which indicate the One who is reflected. There are many symbols (*ayat*) or theophanies (*tajalliyyat*) of God in Islamic esoterism, including the *Qur'an*, the Ka‘bah, nature, sacred art, and especially the Universal or Perfect Man (*al-insan al-kamil*). The doctrine of the Universal Man was given fuller doctrinal expression by one of Ibn ‘Arabi’s successors ‘Abd al-Karim Jili in his treatise *al-Insan al-kamil*.<sup>28</sup> Along with the *Qur'an* or the Word of God, the Universal Man is the central theophany of God in Islam, who contains within himself all of the levels of existence and ultimately Being from the corporeal to the Divine. The Prophet of Islam (as well as the other prophets) is the Universal Man *par excellence*, who reflects the Names of Majesty, Beauty, and Perfection in the center of the cosmos. While other created beings reflect particular combinations of the Names of God, only the Universal Man reflects all of the Names or the comprehensive Name Allah. Moreover, the Arabic word *insan* means man and woman. So while this term is generally translated

<sup>26</sup>Nasr, *The Heart of Islam*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>27</sup>The Infinite also corresponds to the Name al-Rahman or “the Infinitely-Good,” as the Good must radiate outwardly to communicate Itself through so many veils or garments composed of relative degrees of goodness and evil. Thus creation, emanation, multiplicity or the world—the privation of the Good—has as its principle the “feminine” Nature of God, while the singularity and uniqueness of God—before which all things are effaced—can be said to correspond to His “masculine” Nature. Of course these dualities are perfectly reconciled and united in the Divine Reality and Essence, which as the Absolute and the Infinite contains the principles of both masculinity and femininity, unity and multiplicity.

<sup>28</sup>‘Abd al-Karim Jili. *Universal Man*. Trans. by Titus Burckhardt and Angela Culme-Seymour. Roxburgh, Scotland: Beshara Publications, 1995.

as man, it applies to both men and women of great sanctity. This becomes more obvious when one examines Ibn ‘Arabi’s devotion to Nizam, as well as the treasury of Persian Sufi poetry devoted to women as a symbol of the Divine Essence.

While both men and women have the potential to inwardly realize and know the Names of Majesty, Beauty, and Perfection, one’s gender does determine which Names predominate in their outward manifestation. S.H. Nasr states in his study “The Male and the Female in the Islamic Perspective”:

The difference between the sexes cannot be reduced to anatomy and biological function. There are also differences of psychology and temperament, of spiritual types and even principles within the Divine Nature which are the sources in *divinis* of the duality represented on the microcosmic level as male and female. God is both Absolute and Infinite. Absoluteness—and Majesty, which is inseparable from it—are manifested most directly in the masculine state; Infinity and Beauty in the feminine state. The male body itself reflects majesty, power, absoluteness; and the female body reflects beauty, beatitude, and infinity...But since God is one and man, that is, the human being of whichever sex it might be, a theomorphic being who reflects God’s Names and Qualities, each human being also reflects the One and seeks to return to the One.<sup>29</sup>

The male is ultimately brought to perfection through remaining outwardly masculine, yet inwardly feminine, while the perfect female is outwardly feminine and inwardly masculine. In both cases the Divine Qualities that dominate one’s outward form must be complemented by an inward realization of either Beauty or Majesty, which is reflected for man in woman and woman in man.<sup>30</sup> It is necessary to understand this complementary role of men and women in Islam because it directly relates to our discussion of Ibn ‘Arabi and his devotion to Nizam, for she manifested Divine beauty for him and enabled him to contemplate and apprehend the various manifestations of truth and beauty in the world. Moreover, if the Absolute or “masculine”

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<sup>29</sup>See also, Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992). Seyyed Hossein Nasr. *Traditional Islam in the Modern World*. New York: Kegan Paul International, 1990, p. 49.

<sup>30</sup>In general, all Muslim men and women on the spiritual path must approach God through—with the guidance and permission of a spiritual master—invoking His Names of Beauty or Perfection and not those of Majesty. However, invoking a Name of Beauty or Perfection can enable a woman to realize the inward virility that is necessary for all spiritual wayfarers, just as the manifestation of one of the Names of Majesty—such as “the Abaser” (al-Khafid)—can immediately or eventually soften the heart of a man who is proud and lead to an awareness of His Mercy and Grace. In any case, it is never advisable to intentionally invoke God’s Wrath.

Nature of God determines a Muslim's understanding of orthodoxy and the exoteric aspects of tradition, contemplating the Infinite or "feminine" Nature of God enables a Muslim to grasp the universality of Divine Self-disclosures in the various religions and esoterism in general.<sup>31</sup> The Universal Man in Islam, whether male or female, is able to understand and reflect the Absolute and Infinite Nature of God—symbolized by the Name Allah—and is therefore completely orthodox while understanding and appreciating the universality of Divine manifestations in the various religions, nature, and the heart.<sup>32</sup>

Women played a central role in the life of Ibn 'Arabi in many ways. Not only did he love and appreciate the beauty of the feminine form, but two women also guided him on the spiritual path, Fatimah bint al-Muthanna and Shams Umm al-Fuqara'.<sup>33</sup> He therefore acknowledged the wisdom and guidance of both men and women, who served as his guides upon the spiritual path at different times in his life. Regarding his understanding of the feminine theophany of God, Ibn 'Arabi writes,

When man contemplates God in woman, his contemplation rests on that which is passive; if he contemplates Him in himself, seeing that woman comes from man, he contemplates Him in that which is active; and when he contemplates Him alone, without the presence of any form whatsoever issued from Him, his contemplation corresponds to a state of passivity with regard to God, without intermediary. Consequently his contemplation of God in woman is the most perfect, for it is then God, in so far as He is at once active and passive, that he contemplates, whereas in the pure interior contemplation, he contemplates Him only in a passive way. So that the Prophet—Benediction and Peace be upon him—was to love women because of the perfect contemplation of God in them. One

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<sup>31</sup>Frithjof Schuon writes, "...Dhat, the divine "Essence," is a feminine word which—like the word haqiqah—can refer to the superior aspect of femininity: according to this way of seeing things, which is precisely that of Hindu shaktism, femininity is what surpasses the formal, the finite, the outward; it is synonymous with indetermination, illimitation, mystery, and thus evokes the "Spirit which giveth life" in relation to the "letter which killeth." That is to say that femininity in the superior sense comprises a liquefying, interiorizing, liberating power: it liberates from sterile hardnesses, from the dispersing outwardness of limiting and compressing forms. Frithjof Schuon. "Mahashakti". In: *Roots of the Human Condition*. Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2002, pp. 40-41.

<sup>32</sup>This is in fact another meaning of the straight path referred to in the opening chapter of the Quran.

<sup>33</sup>Claude Addas. *Quest for the Red Sulphur*. Trans. by Peter Kingsley. Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993, pp. 87-88.

would never be able to contemplate God directly in absence of all (sensible or spiritual) support, for God, in his Absolute Essence, is independent of all worlds. But, as the (Divine) Reality is inaccessible in respect (of the Essence), and there is contemplation (*shahadah*) only in a substance, the contemplation of God in women is the most intense and the most perfect; and the union which is the most intense (in the sensible order, which serves as support for this contemplation) is the conjugal act.<sup>34</sup>

Here Ibn ‘Arabi argues that the contemplation of God in the feminine form is the most perfect form of contemplation. Moreover, this contemplation does not exclude, but rather is enhanced by physical union with the earthly beloved. Here we observe the foundations and exposition of a contemplative form of spirituality analogous to Tantra in Islam. This theoretical discussion of Ibn ‘Arabi’s metaphysics and cosmology—which is representative of Islamic metaphysics and cosmology in general—sets the stage for Ibn ‘Arabi’s providential meeting with Nizam.

At the beginning of the thirteenth century on a pilgrimage to Mecca, Ibn ‘Arabi had a glimpse of a young Persian maiden that would change his life and inspire his exquisite Arabic poem the *Tarjuman al-ashwaq*.<sup>35</sup> Sayyidah Nizam was the daughter of an eminent scholar from Isfahan, and at only fourteen she is said to have possessed great wisdom, as well as inward and outward beauty.<sup>36</sup> In this regard Martin Lings writes,

In [Ibn ‘Arabi’s] commentary he stresses that fourteen, the number of the full moon, indicates the ‘perfect soul’; and in connection with her name Nizam, which he considers to be eloquently expressive of her incomparability, I feel that he would have applauded the following quotation which I venture to make from a great Sufi of the last century...‘Isa Nur al-Din, though he is known to us, from his remarkable books, as Frithjof Schuon. In one of his yet unpublished texts, written especially for his disciples, he affirms that the perfection of human virtue is ‘to be in harmonious confrontation with God’. Now can it not be said that the most eloquent worldly symbol of the relationship between God and man is the relationship between the two luminaries, the sun and the moon? The words ‘moon’ and ‘man’ are even etymologically connected; and it is on its fourteenth night, when it is full, and only then, that the moon is

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<sup>34</sup>Nasr, *Traditional Islam in the Modern World*, p. 51.

<sup>35</sup>Muhyi al-Din ibn ‘Arabi. *The Interpreter of Desires (Tarjuman al-ashwaq)*. Trans. by Reynold Nicholson. London: Theosophical Publishing House LTD, 1978.

<sup>36</sup>Seyyed Hossein Nasr. *Three Muslim Sages*. Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1976, p. 96.

in harmonious confrontation with the sun. The name Nizam, Harmony thus enables the maiden of fourteen to personify most marvelously perfection of virtue.<sup>37</sup>

In the poetry and prose of the great Sufi masters, as well as in the *Qur'an* itself, an understanding of sacred symbols is necessary to know God and our position in the cosmos in relation to the Divine Principle. Ibn 'Arabi was able to read the cosmic book and relate the meaning of certain symbols in his writings. For Ibn 'Arabi, Nizam becomes a symbol of the Beloved and a theophany of Divine beauty and wisdom. S.H. Nasr writes, "He met a young girl of great devoutness and beauty who henceforth became the embodiment of the eternal *sophia* for him and fulfilled a role in his life which resembles that of Beatrice in the life of Dante."<sup>38</sup> In Ibn 'Arabi's own words he writes,

There rose for me twixt Adhri'at and Busra  
A maiden of fourteen like a full moon.  
Higher than time she stood in majesty,  
Transcendent over it in pride and glory.  
Each moon when it hath reached its plentitude  
A waning suffereth to fulfill the month,  
Save this: no movements hath she through the Signs  
Nor maketh, being repeated, two of One.  
Treasury, thou, of blended fragrances,  
Meadow that putteth forth spring herbs and flowers,  
Beauty hath reached in thee her utmost end.  
For others like to thee there is no room  
In all scope of what is possible.<sup>39</sup>

It was through contemplating the Divine Reality in the feminine form that Ibn 'Arabi was able to write the above verses and his most famous lines of poetry, lines which illustrate Nizam's importance not only as a particular form for contemplation, but also as an opening for Ibn 'Arabi to approach God through the *religio cordis* or religion of the heart:

Receptive now my heart is for each form;

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<sup>37</sup>Martin Lings. *Sufi Poems: A Mediaeval Anthology*. Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 2004, pp. 60-61.

<sup>38</sup>See also, Henry Corbin's *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 136-175. Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*, p. 96.

<sup>39</sup>Lings, *Sufi Poems: A Mediaeval Anthology*, p. 62.

For gazelles pasture, for monks a monastery,  
 Temple for idols, Ka‘bah to be rounded,  
 Tables of Torah and script of Quran.  
 My religion is love’s religion: where’er turn  
 Her camels, that religion my religion is, my faith.  
 An example is set us by Bishr, lover  
 Of Hind and her sister, and likewise the loves  
 Of Qays and Layla, of Mayya and Ghaylan.<sup>40</sup>

In Ibn ‘Arabi’s commentary to the verse, “My religion is love’s religion,” he explicitly connects the religion of love (*din al-hubb*) with the inner and outer reality of the Quran and *Sunnah* of the Prophet of Islam. He writes, “‘My religion is love’s religion,’ [is] in reference to the verse, ‘...Follow me, and God will love you...’” (Quran 3:31) He goes on to state that, “This is a peculiar prerogative of Muslims, for the station of perfect love is appropriated to Muhammad beyond any other prophet, since God took him as His beloved.<sup>41</sup> Thus, Ibn ‘Arabi connects his universal vision of Reality—one which embraces the Self-disclosures of the Real in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, idolatry, nature and women—to the very particularity of the Prophet Muhammad and his spiritual station. It would be easy to dismiss these references as pious exaggerations, however, for the Shaykh al-Akbar the Prophet of Islam encompasses all prophetic inheritances as the Seal of the prophets. Moreover, he is the prophetic reviver of Abrahamic monotheism, which, while negating the divinity of all that is other than God, allows us to see the signs and Names of God—the traces and very Face of the Beloved—wherever we turn. For Muslims, the prototypical romance is the meeting between God and His Prophet. We participate in this love by following the *Sunnah* of the Prophet through which God loves us. Thus, the religion of love is not primarily a capacity to appreciate various religions, but God’s Love for us, which we attract by following in the footsteps of one of His prophets, which in turn allows us to love and recognize Him in the diverse theophanies in creation. While each revelation and prophetic pattern has the capacity to open us to the religion of love, it is important for contemporary spiritual seekers and scholars to take note of the particular religious paths that sages such as Ibn ‘Arabi and Ramakrishna took to arrive at their universal visions of Reality.

Ibn ‘Arabi’s recognition of the veracity of religions other than his own is strikingly similar to Ramakrishna’s, especially because in both cases their understanding of the unity and diversity of religions was catalyzed by a feminine theophany of the

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>‘Arabi, *The Interpreter of Desires (Tarjuman al-ashwaq)*, p. 69.

Divine. However, unlike Ramakrishna, Ibn ‘Arabi only practiced one religion. He certainly appreciated other forms of worship inwardly and demonstrates a profound intellectual understanding of these forms, but he did not try to practice these religions as we see in the life of Ramakrishna. In a manner similar to Ramakrishna, however, Ibn ‘Arabi’s devotion to a particular form provided an opening for him to appreciate what has been termed “the transcendent unity of religions,” expressed here below as the terrestrial harmony (*nizam*) of religions.<sup>42</sup> For scholars who followed Ibn ‘Arabi, this metaphysical unity and cosmological harmony is best expressed through the famous doctrine *wahdat al-wujud* or the transcendent Unity of Being, for the religions only truly meet in the Divine Principle. While Sri Ramakrishna was able to express his understanding of religious unity by participating in various religions, Ibn ‘Arabi’s universalism was experienced in the heart, which is the locus of the Divine Being and Presence according to the *hadith*, “The heart of the believer in the throne of the All-Merciful.” From this inner perspective we can assert that the religions do in fact meet in the heart of the Muslim gnostic.<sup>43</sup> Only from this point of view can one speak of an immanent unity of religions in Islam, if one keeps in mind that this unity still transcends the formal level through its immanence.

There are numerous examples in the writings of Ibn ‘Arabi of his sympathy for and understanding of other religious forms in not only his poetry but also his prose.<sup>44</sup> One, therefore, cannot dismiss his poetic expressions as simply allegorical given that he makes the same observations in his treatises. In these selections it is clear that Ibn ‘Arabi understood that the diversity of religious forms are based on the infinite possibilities that issue from the Divine Names and Nature. It follows that his metaphysics and cosmology are based on knowledge of the Divine Reality and not only on devotion to a particular form or manifestation of Reality such as Nizam, who nevertheless served as a support for and an expression of Divine love and gnosis—and religious harmony—in the life and teachings of the Shaykh.

### 3.3 Some Conclusions

In closing it is necessary to stress that while both Śri Ramakrishna and Muhyi al-Din ibn ‘Arabi saw the Divine Reality in various forms and in the feminine form in partic-

<sup>42</sup>Frithjof Schuon. *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*. Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 2005.

<sup>43</sup>Seyyed Hossein Nasr. “The Heart of the Faithful is the Throne of the All-Merciful”. In: *Paths to the Heart: Sufism and the Christian East*. Ed. by James Cutsinger. World Wisdom, Inc., 2002.

<sup>44</sup>William Chittick. *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-‘Arabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994.

ular, their understanding of Divine Self-disclosures was not limited by any one form. Ramakrishna states:

*Sat-chit-ananda* (being-consciousness-bliss) is like an infinite ocean. Intense cold freezes the water into ice, which floats on the ocean in blocks of various forms. Likewise, through the cooling influence of *bhakti*, one sees forms of God in the Ocean of the Absolute. These forms are meant for bhaktas, the lovers of God. But when the Sun of Knowledge rises, the ice melts; it becomes the same water it was before. Water above and water below, everywhere nothing but water.<sup>45</sup>

The above statement mirrors the words of Ibn ‘Arabi:

None but God is loved in the existent things. It is He who is manifest within every beloved to the eye of every lover—and there is no existent thing that is not a lover. So the cosmos is all lover and beloved, and all of it goes back to Him... Though no lover loves any but his own Creator, he is veiled from Him by the love for Zaynab, Su‘ad, Hind, Layla, this world, money, position, and everything loved in the world. Poets exhaust their words in writing about all of these existent things without knowing, but the gnostics never hear a verse, a riddle, a panegyric, or a love poem that is not about Him, hidden beyond the veil of forms.<sup>46</sup>

Ultimately, both sages worshipped the Supreme Reality and taught that one of the greatest symbols or manifestations of that Reality is the feminine form. While there are marked differences in Ramakrishna’s and Ibn ‘Arabi’s visions and expressions of pluralism, both men believed that all revealed religions issue from and lead to the same Divine source. Moreover, their understanding of this truth came as a result of their love and devotion to a feminine theophany, whose beauty, strength, and wisdom enabled them to see these attributes in other religions.

While Ramakrishna and Ibn ‘Arabi are exceptional examples in their respective traditions, there are other moments in the history of Hinduism, Islam, and other traditions, where sages were expanded and illuminated through an encounter with a feminine theophany. According to tradition, the first wife of the Prophet Muhammad and the first Muslim believer, Khadijah, consulted her cousin Waraqah—a learned Christian—to verify her husband’s encounter with the Angel Gabriel after he received

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<sup>45</sup>Gupta, *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 191.

<sup>46</sup>William Chittick. “Ibn al-‘Arabi as Lover”. In: *Sufi* 75 (2008), p. 63.

the first verses of the *Qur'an*.<sup>47</sup> The Prophet of Islam also married a Jewish woman, Safiyyah, and another who was a Coptic Christian, Mariyah, who were not compelled to accept Islam, although they both eventually embraced the faith and were known as “Mothers of the believers” along with the Prophet’s other wives.<sup>48</sup> Martin Lings states, “...On one occasion [Safiyyah] came to the Prophet in tears because one of her new companions had tried to make her feel inferior. He said: ‘Say unto them: my father is Aaron, and mine uncle is Moses.’”<sup>49</sup> Fatimah, the daughter of Muhammad and Khadijah and the husband of ‘Ali, is among the most saintly women in Islam and frequently compared to the Virgin Mary. In both Shi‘ism and Sunnism, the biological and spiritual descendants of the Prophet issue from Fatimah and ‘Ali. According to Henry Corbin, “The First Imam and Fatimah are related to each other in the same reciprocal way as the two first hypostases, *‘aql* and *nafs*, Intelligence and Soul, or in terms more familiar to us... *Logos* and *Sophia*.”<sup>50</sup> Also noteworthy are the mothers of

<sup>47</sup>Martin Lings. *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources*. Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions International, 1983, p. 44.

<sup>48</sup>Lings, op. cit., pp. 268-271, 277.

<sup>49</sup>The Prophet’s love for women in general is a leitmotif of his life and teachings and is expressed through his chivalrous qualities recorded in the Sirah and numerous Hadith, including, for example, “Three things of this world of yours were made lovable to me: women, perfume—and the coolness of my eye was placed in the ritual prayer,” “The whole of this world is an object of delight and the best object of delight in this world is a devout woman,” “Marriage is half of religion,” and “Heaven lies at the feet of mothers.” On the symbolism of the first hadith and its significance in Islam and Sufism, see Muhyi al-Din ibn ‘Arabi, *The Ringstones of Wisdom (Fusus al-hikam)*, trans. Caner K. Dagli (Chicago: Great Books of the Islamic World, 2004), pp. 277-294. For a comprehensive treatment of this subject as it relates to the Islamic tradition as a whole, see Annemarie Schimmel, *My Soul Is a Woman: The Feminine in Islam* (New York, Continuum, 1999). Lings, op. cit., p. 271.

<sup>50</sup>See also, Henry Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 160; and Henry Corbin, *The Voyage and the Messenger: Iran and Philosophy*, trans. Joseph Rowe (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1998), pp. 217-230. Patrick Laude also writes that Louis Massignon, “...perceives of Fatimah as the only member of the Ummah who, at the time of Muhammad’s death, conceived of the mission of her father as incomplete. This incompleteness is particularly connected to the status of non-Arab converts in the community: While Fatimah has been the host par excellence of this category of companions, the advent of Abu Bakr and ‘Umar represented the crystallization of an Arab, purely agnatic, identity of Islam that the cognatic mode of adoption, exemplified by the relationship between the Ahl al-Bayt and the Persian Salman Pak, called into question. What is at stake, in a sense, is nothing less than the universality of Islam, and it is no coincidence that a woman be the guarantor of this ideal. It bears mentioning that, in his study on “The Umma and its Synonyms,” Massignon noted that the term Ummah, which refers to the Islamic community of the faithful, is etymologically akin to Umm, the mother, and by extension, to the cognatic family, its domestic household, and those placed under its protection, in opposition to the agnatic clan, sha’b, the ethnic and nationalist character of which relates to male leadership. The spiritual affinities of the Ummah with the inclusion and protection of non-Arabs in Islam are in perfect consonance with Fatimah’s function vis-à-vis the Bayt (the Household) and its “clients” (mawali).” *Pathways to an Inner Islam: Massignon, Corbin, Guénon, and Schuon* (Albany, NY: State University

the Fourth and Twelfth Shi'ite Imams, Shahrbanu and Narjis, who according to some traditions were originally a Zoroastrian Sassanid princess and a Christian Byzantine princess, and therefore integrated their heritages and blood with those of the family of the Prophet.<sup>51</sup> There is also a wealth of Arabic and especially Persian Sufi poetry on this subject, among the most striking examples being the story of Shaykh-i San'an and the Christian girl in Farid al-Din 'Attar's *Conference of the Birds*.<sup>52</sup> Also significant is Sayyid 'Ali Hamadani and his encounter with and respect for the dancing Shaivite, Lalla Yogishwari.

One must add to this list the believing women of the Bible who are also a part of the Islamic tradition and represent the universality of Islam and Abrahamic monotheism in general in diverse ways, including, for example, the wives of Abraham and patriarchs of the Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions, Sarah and Hagar, the wife of Pharaoh, Asiyah, and the Queen of Sheba, Bilqis, whose stories are also related throughout the Quran. Foremost among these women is the Virgin Mary, who is a Jewish woman from the line of David, the mother of Jesus the Messiah, *Sedes Sapientiae* or "Throne of Wisdom," and according to the Quran, "chosen...above the women of the worlds." (3:42)<sup>53</sup> Frithjof Schuon saw the Virgin Mary (Maryam al-Batul) as a celestial embodiment of wisdom and esoterically as "Mother of all the prophets." He writes,

...The Virgin Mary, who—according to a symbolism common to Christianity and Islam—has suckled her children, the prophets and sages, from the beginning and outside of time...Mother of all the prophets and matrix of all the sacred forms, she has her place of honor within Islam even while belonging *a priori* to Christianity; for this reason she constitutes a kind of link between these two religions, whose common purpose is universalizing the monotheism of Israel. The Virgin Mary is not merely

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of New York Press, 2010), pp. 106-107. Henry Corbin. *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*. Trans. by Nancy Pearson. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977, p. 64.

<sup>51</sup>M.A. Amir-Moezzi. *The Spirituality of Shi'i Islam*. Trans. by David Streight et al. London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2011, pp. 45-100.

<sup>52</sup>See also, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, pp. 105-107. Farid al-Din 'Attar. *Conference of the Birds (Mantiq al-tayr)*. Trans. by Afkham Darbandi and Dick Davis. Penguin, 1984, pp. 57-75.

<sup>53</sup>Schuon writes, "Divine Maya—Femininity in divinis—is not only that which projects and creates; it is also that which attracts and liberates. The Blessed Virgin as *Sedes Sapientiae* personifies this merciful wisdom which descends towards us and which we too, whether we know it or not, carry in our very essence; and it is precisely by virtue of this potentiality or virtuality that Wisdom comes down upon us. The immanent seat of Wisdom is the heart of man." Frithjof Schuon. "Sedes Sapientiae". In: *Studies in Comparative Religion* (1980), p. 179.

the embodiment of a particular mode of sanctity; she embodies sanctity as such. She is not one particular color or one particular perfume; she is colorless light and pure air. In her essence she is identified with merciful Infinitude, which—preceding all forms—overflows upon them all, embraces them all, and reintegrates them all.<sup>54</sup>

Schuon also observes,

Muhyi al-Din ibn ‘Arabi, after declaring that his heart ‘has opened itself to all forms’, that it is ‘a cloister for monks, a temple of idols, the Ka‘bah’, adds: ‘I practice the religion of Love’; now it is over this informal religion that—Semitically speaking—Sayyidatna Maryam presides. She is thus to be identified with the supreme *Shakti* or with the heavenly *Prajnaparamita* [transcendent Wisdom] of the Asiatic traditions.<sup>55</sup>

Also relevant to Muslims are the references to wisdom throughout the Bible and especially “Lady Wisdom” in Solomon’s Book of Proverbs.<sup>56</sup> We read, “Blessed is the man who has found wisdom...Her ways are good ways, and all her paths are peaceful. She is a tree of life to all that lay hold upon her.” (Proverbs 3:13; 17-18) Like the Hebrew word *hokmah*, the Arabic word *hikmah* is feminine—both meaning wisdom—and thus directly related to our understanding of *sophia*. Not unrelated are the Hebrew term *shekinah* and its Arabic equivalent *sakinah*, also feminine, meaning Divine peace, tranquility and the immanent presence of God in the heart and the world. We read in an initiatic verse of the Quran, “He it is Who sends down the Divine peace (*al-sakinah*) into the hearts of the believers, that they might add faith unto their faith...” (48:4)<sup>57</sup> The Hebrew word *barak* also corresponds to the Arabic *barakah* — again feminine—and mean blessing, grace and the radiation of the Divine presence through prayer, holy books, the prophets, saints, sacred and traditional art and sacred sites such as Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem, as well as virgin nature. All of these terms are

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<sup>54</sup>Frithjof Schuon. *Christianity/Islam Perspectives on Esoteric Ecumenism*. Trans. by Mark Perry, Jean-Pierre Lafouge, and James S. Cutsinger. Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2008, p. 88.

<sup>55</sup>Frithjof Schuon. “The Wisdom of Sayyidatna Maryam”. In: *Dimensions of Islam*. Lahore: Suhail Academy, 1999, p. 95.

<sup>56</sup>See, for example, the Book of Proverbs 1:20-33; 3:13-18; 4:5-9; 8:1-36.

<sup>57</sup>Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah al-Iskandari writes in his *Miftah al-falah*, “It is said that peace (*al-sakinah*) is a mystery like the wind, or was created with a face like that of a human being, or that it is a spirit from God which speaks to men and guides them when they differ on a matter, and so on. From what we have already mentioned, peace is probably something similar to that which descends on whoever recites the Quran or gathers to invoke, because it belongs to the Spirit and the angels. God knows best!” Ibn ‘Ata Allah al-Iskandari. *The Key to Salvation: A Sufi Manual of Invocation (Miftah al-falah wa misbah al-arwah)*. Trans. by Mary Ann Koury Danner. Cambridge, UK: The Islamic Texts Society, 1998, p. 55.

grammatically feminine and intuitively associated by Muslims with the feminine or beautiful aspect of God, and also with women in general, who are often named Sakinah or Barakah, for example. The Arabic word for mother, *umm*, can be translated as archetype and finds expression in such terms as “the Mother of the Book” (*Umm al-kitab*), which refers to the common transcendent archetype and essence of all Divine revelations, as well as the particular form and essence of the Quran.<sup>58</sup> It is also helpful to recall the primacy of the Divine Names of Beauty (*Jamal*) over those of Majesty (*Jalal*) in Islam, which relates to the Nature and very Essence of God as envisaged by the Sufis.

Devotion to the Divine feminine is so ubiquitous in Hinduism that it is not possible for us to do justice to the rich tradition devoted to the Goddess and Her various manifestations here. All of the examples mentioned above, as well as Kali in the life of Ramakrishna and Nizam in the life of Ibn ‘Arabi, are so many manifestations of the celestial and eternal Sophia, which is the shared wisdom at the heart of all religions. According to Ananda K. Coomaraswamy:

The beauty of the Beloved there is no longer as it is here contingent and merely a participation or reflection, but that of Supernal Wisdom, that of the One Madonna, that of the intrinsic being of the Bride, which “rains down flames of fire” (*Convivio*) and as claritas illuminates and guides the pure intellect.<sup>59</sup>

This understanding of wisdom compels us to correct our modern understanding of religion and philosophy, which is the love of Divine Wisdom or Sophia as *She* manifests in the feminine form and in the heart of every man and woman.<sup>60</sup> Today, if one accepts that anything can be known at all, philosophy is generally associated with

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<sup>58</sup>Samuel Zinner. “The Semiotics of Inliteration of the Umm al-Kitab and Sacred Time Dilation”. In: *Christianity and Islam: Essays on Ontology and Archetype*. London: Matheson Trust, 2010, pp. 11-17.

<sup>59</sup>Ananda K. Coomaraswamy. “On the Pertinence of Philosophy”. In: *The Essential Ananda K. Coomaraswamy*. Ed. by Rama Coomaraswamy. Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2004, p. 81.

<sup>60</sup>Seyyed Hossein Nasr writes, “The person often called the “father” of Western logic and philosophy was Parmenides, who is usually presented as a rationalist who happened to have written a poem of mediocre quality. But as the recent brilliant studies of Peter Kingsley have clearly demonstrated, far from being a rationalist in the modern sense, he was deeply immersed in the world of prophecy in its Greek religious sense and was a seer and visionary. In his poem, which contains his philosophical message, Parmenides is led to the other world by the Daughters of the Sun who came from the Mansion of Light situated at the farthest degree of existence...Thus Parmenides undertakes the inner journey until he meets the goddess who teaches him everything of importance, that is, teaches him what is considered to be the origin of Greek philosophical speculation...” Seyyed Hossein Nasr. *Islamic Philosophy from its Origin to the Present*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006, p. 2.

reason, analysis and the bifurcation of subject and object, whereas ancient sages saw wisdom as essentially intuition, synthesis and unification. The feminine theophany is the objective manifestation and mirror of our own inner wisdom, both of which have their roots in the Supreme Wisdom of God and even the hidden Divine Ipseity (*al-Dhat*).<sup>61</sup> In the lives of Ramakrishna, Ibn ‘Arabi and a number of the greatest luminaries in Hinduism, Islam, and other traditions, devotion to the feminine symbol of the Divine plays a central role. What is remarkable about these figures is that they came to a similar understanding of the veracity of the revealed religions through their relationship to a feminine theophany of the One Absolute and Infinite Reality. Ultimately, love is able to break down barriers and transport us beyond the confines and limitations of the ego through the beatific vision of and ultimate union with the Beloved, through which we gain a more expansive and objective vision of Reality.

### 3.4 About the Author

Zachary Markwith is a doctoral student in Islamic studies at the Graduate Theological Union and the University of California, Berkeley, where he focuses on Islamic philosophy, Sufism, Sunni-Shi’i relations, and comparative religious studies. He earned an M.A. in Hinduism and Islam from the George Washington University and a B.A. in Islamic studies from the University of California, Santa Barbara. In addition to his academic training, Zachary has studied Islamic spirituality with teachers from West Africa, Iran, and North America. He has contributed articles to leading traditionalist journals, including *Sophia* and *Sacred Web*, and is the author of the forthcoming book *One God, Many Prophets: the Universal Wisdom of Islam*.

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<sup>61</sup>Sachiko Murata writes, “My ‘feminist agenda’ is to help those Muslims who are so inclined to reestablish the vision of the Divine Feminine, which is the Essence of God. The sapiential perspective allows people to see feminine qualities situated at the peak of reality. The Real in Itself is receptive to every entification, every thing. It gives birth to the bipolar God who is both merciful and wrathful, yin and yang, mother and father. The mercy of this bipolar God precedes Her wrath, which is to say that Her femininity is more real and fundamental than Her masculinity.” Seyyed Hossein Nasr also states, “...the word *al-dhat* itself is feminine in Arabic reflecting the metaphysical truth that the internal dimension of the Divinity which is identified with Beauty and Infinity is the prototype of femininity and is ‘feminine’ in the highest sense of this reality.” *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, p. 112. See also, Zachary Markwith, “Thou art Dhat: Metaphysical Expressions of Non-Duality in Islam,” *Sacred Web* 22 (January 2009), pp. 91-117. Sachiko Murata. *The Tao of Islam*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992, p. 324.

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## Chapter 4

# The Dervish, Death, and Qur'anic Hermeneutics

*Farasha Euker*

Bismilahir-rahmanir-rahim!

Pozivam za svjedoka mašionicu i pero i ono što se  
perom piše;

Pozivam za svjedoka nesigurnu tamu sumraka i noć  
i sve što ona oživi;

Pozivam za svjedoka mjesec kad najedra i zoru kad  
zabijeli;

Pozivam za svjedoka sudnji dan, i dušu što sama sebe  
kori;

Pozivam za svjedoka vrijeme, početak i svršetak svega  
—da je svaki čovjek uvijek na gubitku.<sup>1</sup>

Bismilahir-rahmanir-rahim!

I call as a witness an ink pot and a quill  
and that which is written with a quill;

I call as a witness the insecure darkness of twilight and  
night, and everything that she brings back to life;

I call as a witness the moon when it blossoms, and the dawn  
as it turns to whiteness;

I call as a witness the Judgment Day and  
the blaming self;

I call as a witness time, the beginning and the end

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<sup>1</sup>Meša Selimović. *Derviš i smrt*. Ed. by Rišto Trifković. Third. Sarajevo: Svjetloš, 1967, p. 9.

of everything—that loss is every person’s destiny.<sup>2</sup>

Thus begins and ends Meša Selimović’s *The Dervish and Death*, a novel both rich in profundities and not afraid of tackling the psychological angst of the post-Enlightenment mind with razor-sharp precision. The novel’s bleak ending may appear depressing, but there is hope and all is not lost, for in the process comes wisdom, and pain may lead to realization. As Selimović writes in the dedication to his wife:

If I could write the most beautiful book in the world, I would devote it to my wife Darka. This way I will be eternally indebted to her love and nobility. But all I can do is mention her name—with full gratitude—at the beginning of this story, which like all other stories, speaks about the search for happiness.

*The Dervish and Death* is ultimately a novel about “the search for happiness.” Selimović’s philosophical tale follows Ahmed Nurudin, fictional shaykh of a Mevlevi tekke during the Austro-Hungarian rule over Bosnia and Herzegovina, but more than just simply telling a story, Selimović presents us with a new way of approaching scripture, one uniquely suited to the modern human, for if scripture is timeless, then it must be a mirror in which each individual and society can see its best and worst features mirrored upon each other. Consider the lines which open this paper: they are taken from Selimović’s Bosnian translation of selected Qur’anic verses, but they are no standard translation, as can be seen by comparing those lines to an accurate translation of the Qur’anic verses:

NUN. CONSIDER the pen, and all that they write [therewith]! (Qur’an LXVIII, 1)

NAY, I call to witness the coming-down in parts [of this Qur’an]. (Qur’an LVI, 75)

Consider the night when it departs, and the morn when it dawns! (Qur’an LXXIV, 33-34)

NAY! I call to witness the Day of Resurrection! But nay! I call to witness the accusing voice of man’s own conscience! (Qur’an LXXV, 1-2)

CONSIDER the flight of time! Verily, man is bound to lose himself. (Qur’an CIII, 1-2)<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>All English translations from *The Dervish and Death* are my own.

<sup>3</sup>All translations from the Qur’an are from Muhammad Asad’s magisterial *Message of the Qur’an*.

Selimović was not a theologian or other scholar of the faith, so as a writer he was able to take an outsider's view, while still being among the faithful. As both a Muslim and a Communist, Selimović's perspective was rather unique and happens to be largely shared by the author of this paper. It is the aim of this paper to demonstrate that Selimović's Qur'anic interpretations were not simply a literary device, but a means and method for teaching us how to understand scripture in a new light so it purifies the mind, rather than rotting on dusty shelves or rotting the minds of those who would approach it in an overly literalistic fashion.

Kad bi Bog kažnjavao za svako učinjeno zlo,  
ne bi na zemlji oštalo nijedno živo biće.<sup>4</sup>

If God were to send punishment for every act of evil,  
no living being would be left on Earth.

Now if God were to take men [immediately] to task for all the evil that they do [on earth], He would not leave a single living creature upon its face. (Qur'an XVI, 61)

What is interesting here is Selimović's change from taking humans to task, to a generic calculation of evil deeds. In the original, it is as if all beings must suffer due to the evil deeds of humans, whereas in Selimović's version, there is more of an opening for animal consciousness, including the possibility for them to commit sins. Ontologically speaking, this is a very intriguing and important development, however, while this interpretation takes us away from simplistic views of animal consciousness and the Cartesian view of animals as machines, it still does not explain why *all* living beings would disappear. Could we really consider that every innocent creature committed some evil? Perhaps so, but intention is too important to rule out, and it seems there must be at least some beings that never intentionally sinned. In that case, perhaps the most appropriate interpretation of this verse is that there is so much evil created, particularly by humans, that perhaps without the mercy of God—which in Islam is primary to all other attributes—the world would not be worth saving, and as such, even the innocent would perish, though naturally, assuming God's mercy, the pure and innocent creatures would eventually be saved.

Govorio sam: "Budi zahvalan, dome Davudov. I reci: došla je istina.  
Došao je čas. Jer svako kruži svojom putanjom do određenog roka. Stvara

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<sup>4</sup>Selimović, *Derviš i smrt*, p. 14.

vas Bog u utrobama majki vaših, pa vas iz jednog oblika u drugi pretvara, u tami trostruko neprozirnoj. Ne tugujte, radujte se raju koji vam je obećan. O robovi moji, nema za vas straha danas, i nećete biti žalosni. O smirena dušo, vrati se gospodaru svome zadovoljna, jer je on tobom zadovoljan. Uđi među robove moje, uđi u moj dženet.<sup>5</sup>

And I would say: “Be grateful, house of David, and say: The Truth has come. The hour has come. Because every wayfarer follows a circular path until their time has come. God creates you in your mothers’ wombs, recreating you from one form into another, in a darkness thrice unknowable. Do not wallow, rejoice at the thought of Heaven that was promised to all of you. O, my slaves, you must not tremble in fear today, for your faces won’t be washed by tears. O, you calm soul, come back to your Lord in a joyful state, because He is pleased with you. Enter among my slaves, enter into my Jannah <sup>6</sup>.

[T]hey made for him whatever he wished of sanctuaries, and statues, and basins as [large as] great watering-troughs, and cauldrons firmly anchored.

[And We said:] “Labor, O David’s people, in gratitude [towards Me]—and [remember that] few are the truly grateful [even] among My servants!” (Qur’an XXXIV, 13)

And say: “The truth has now come [to light], and falsehood has withered away: for, behold, all falsehood is bound to wither away!” (Qur’an XVII, 81)

Hence, whoever strives hard [in God’s cause] does so only for his own good: for, verily, God does not stand in need of anything in all the worlds! (Qur’an XXIX, 6)

[But,] behold, as for those who say, “Our Sustainer is God,” and then steadfastly pursue the right way—upon them do angels often descend, [saying:] “Fear not and grieve not, but receive the glad tidings of that paradise which has been promised to you! (Qur’an XLI, 30)

[But unto the righteous God will say,] “O thou human being that hast attained to inner peace! Return thou unto thy Sustainer, well-pleased

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<sup>5</sup>Selimović, op. cit., p. 16.

<sup>6</sup>An ‘Arabic term meaning paradise, but having connotations of unknown, unseen, and ineffable.

[and] pleasing [Him]: enter, then, together with My [other true] servants yea, enter thou My paradise!” (Qur’an LXXXIX, 27-30)

This is one of the longer passages Selimović translated, and it is quite illustrative of his views. First is the verse with God asking David’s people to be grateful. Ideally, one who feels gratitude toward someone or something should honor that which they are grateful to, so one who is grateful to God should work on His path. It is not necessarily so simple. The God of Islam is beyond all pettiness and puts belief ahead of works, therefore gratitude may simply be enough. For one to say *Alhamdulillah* with true sincerity in their heart, they would fulfill the first and most important pillar of Islam, even if they didn’t mechanically recite the shahada, just as remembrance is better than prayer.

The forms of the Islamic prayer are ubiquitous. One would naturally think this prayer is divinely sanctioned, yet it is not. Nowhere in the Qur’an are the forms of prayer described. In fact, the Qur’an does not even command praying five times per day. The extent of the prayer instructions in the Qur’an are: to pray, and to pray at multiple times of the day. Seeing as how the Qur’an does not command one how to pray, the majority of the Muslim community have assumed that this information comes from the hadith literature. To a certain extent that is correct. The hadith certainly contains more information regarding prayer, than does the Qur’an. I doubt that any practicing Muslim alive today learned to pray from reading the hadith. Even the salafists must rely on scholars for instruction. For every part of the prayer that is clarified by the hadith, there are an equal or greater number of contradictory reports. It was the scholars who solidified the prayer into its current canonized forms. The scholars most likely arrived at their conclusions through a very selective use of hadith, combined with the practice of the community. I have no reason to doubt the sincerity of their intentions, particularly since a uniform mode of prayer, fosters a sense of unity among disparate sections of the community. If one looks closely enough, they shall see that very little of the Muslim prayer is original to Islam; the various pieces being culled from diverse traditions, primarily the Jewish, Zoroastrian, and Arabian Pagan faiths. Clearly, communal prayer must be uniform, for if each person prays their own way in a communal setting, chaos would ensue. Judging from the facts at hand, I see little reason to stick to the classical Muslim prayer forms when one is praying alone. The prayer could be looked upon not as an ideal, but as the bare minimum that can be replaced by invocation. When one is praying alone, the forms are not of the greatest importance, but the substance. It would perhaps be an entirely different matter if certain forms of prayer were prescribed by the Qur’an, but they are not. Allah’s infinite mercy has left it up to us to worship as we please, for we know which forms work best for ourselves, and God knows our intentions.

The next important point to make is that Selimović states that the truth has come, without mentioning that falsehood has vanished. We live in a world of illusions, false representations and copies of copies. The simulacra are now as real as the originals, in form, though not in substance. So, while falsehood is quantitatively dominant, truth as such must always be qualitatively superior, and if the truth has come, the people must choose: do we hoard more fancy gadgets or do we heed the word of the Lord? It is ultimately the person's choice, a choice most of us, unfortunately, are unable to determine correctly. Selimović adds that "the hour has come" and that "every wayfarer follows a circular path until their time has come". These lines can be interpreted as meaning that for each one of us the Judgment Day is now. No one knows their appointed time, so one must walk the straight path and live in the present, trying to please God each moment as if that moment alone, that split second, were solely responsible for their salvation. Unlike orthodox Sunni Muslims, who place a large degree of emphasis upon the principle of destiny, Selimović seems almost Shi'a in his attitude. While he certainly maintains existentialist views throughout the book, it may be more than that; it may be a manifestation of his inner knowledge of the fact that his own brother died unjustly, therefore, justice plays a larger role for him than destiny. He then proceeds with a preliminary statement that we were created in a "a darkness thrice unknowable." This statement could be helpful for the modern skeptic, because they have doubts in a future life, but they could be reassured by hearing that our lives began in mystery and darkness, so a new life may begin from the unfathomable. One could surmise based on Selimović's interpretation of these verses that he had at least a cursory knowledge of the thought of Ibn 'Arabi<sup>7</sup>.

Moj Bože, oni ne vjeruju!<sup>8</sup>

My God, they are of the unbelievers!

[But God has full knowledge of the true believer] and of his [despairing] cry: "O my Sustainer! Verily, these are people who will not believe!"  
(Qur'an XLIII, 88)

Selimović appears to be more hopeful in his interpretation, for while "they are of the unbelievers", they may believe at some point in the future, leaving the possibility

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<sup>7</sup>The writings of Ibn 'Arabi have had a particularly profound influence in Bosnia. One of the most important commentators on the *Fusus al-Hikam* was a Bosnian, and the first, and only, translation of the *Futubat al-Makkiyya* was into Bosnian.

<sup>8</sup>Selimović, *Derviš i smrt*, p. 31.

open for anyone's change of consciousness, just as the dreaded Angulimala became Ahimsaka.<sup>9</sup>

Zar mislite da će čovjek poštiti ono što želi?<sup>10</sup>

Do you think a man is capable of attaining that which he desires?

Does man imagine that it is his due to have all that he might wish for[?]  
(Qur'an LIII, 24)

Here we see a more radical reinterpretation from the pen of Selimović. The Qur'an claims that though a human may be arrogant and claim they have the right to everything under the Sun, it is not in the nature of things or God's plan to allow any one person, or even the entire human species to have everything that could be hoped for. On the other hand, Selimović's point is that one cannot achieve what one desires. This is Sufi in conception, or even Buddhist-like in essence, for he is saying that no matter how hard one tries, they can never fulfill their desires, and even if they were satiated, the glutton always wants more. The only way to quench desire is, in fact, through the killing of desire. The fact that individuals think they need more and more, and that the human species seems intent on self-destruction through over-production, means that the only way forward for the species and world as a whole is a future based on sustainability, and sustainability can only be achieved by curtailing desires. The desecration of the environment destroys nature, the most universal scripture given to us. In Islam, humans were created so God could be known, and as such, the highest task for a human is to remember God. Desires, whether they are for something noble, or for something base and reprehensible, are still desires, and they are not remembrance of God, so the first task of a Muslim must be to renounce desires, then to invoke the divine name, and when one is firmly engrossed by the name, one will lose their remaining desires, know their self and strive simply for union with God.

Jesu li štavljani katanci na srca njihova?<sup>11</sup>

Were padlocks placed upon their hearts?

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<sup>9</sup>In various Buddhist stories there is a tale related of a murderer who killed 999 individuals and placed one of their bones on a string he hung round his neck, hence the name Angulimala (bone-necklace). He wished to kill the Buddha for his thousandth kill, but after a prolonged period where the Buddha walked, while Angulimala ran, Angulimala became enlightened and was one of the Buddha's most devoted disciples, gaining the name Ahimsaka (the one who can do no harm).

<sup>10</sup>Selimović, *Derviš i smrt*, p. 41.

<sup>11</sup>Selimović, op. cit., p. 63.

Will they not, then, ponder over this Qur'an?—or are there locks upon their hearts? (Qur'an XLVII, 24)

This verse is generalized by Selimović. The Qur'an refers to locked hearts in a very specific sense, but if we look to the modern person, it seems that their hearts are not only blocked from receiving revelation, but they are also prevented from acknowledging friendship and loving in a truly beautiful and self-sacrificing way. Love of one human for another should be a microcosmic representation of the greater love one feels for God, their creator.

Spas i mir Ibrahimu,  
Spas i mir Musau i Harunu,  
Spas i mir Ilijasu,  
Spas i mir Ishaku,  
Spas i mir nesrećnom Ahmedu Nurudinu.<sup>12</sup>

Salvation and peace upon Abraham,  
Salvation and peace upon Moses and Aaron,  
Salvation and peace upon Elijah,  
Salvation and peace upon Isaac,  
Salvation and peace be upon the despondent Ahmed Nurudin.

“Peace be upon Abraham!” (Qur'an XXXVII, 109)

“Peace be upon Moses and Aaron!” (Qur'an XXXVII, 120)

“Peace be upon Elijah and his followers!” (Qur'an XXXVII, 130)

Selimović goes out on a limb here and has the shaykh Ahmed Nurudin recite his own name within a Qur'anic prayer along with various prophets. This could be seen as rather sacrilegious, but it need not be viewed that way. One may pray for loved ones, friends, or the prophets, but generally in the back, or front, of one's mind is the hope for one's own salvation and peace. This creative addition by Selimović turns these verses into a powerful prayer for the benefit of the soul; but it is more than that, because Ahmed not only asked for peace, but he admitted his unhappiness. This admission, while it could be seen as an ungrateful attitude, is in fact none other than the dark night or contraction that every soul must go through. As Simone Weil succinctly states:

Religion in so far as it is a source of consolation is a hindrance to true faith: in this sense atheism is a purification. I have to be atheistic with the

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<sup>12</sup>Selimović, op. cit., p. 84.

part of myself which is not made for God. Among those men in whom the supernatural part has not been awakened, the atheists are right and the believers wrong.<sup>13</sup>

Nurudin's unhappiness is not necessarily a defect, but a positive attribute and purification—one that will help rather than hinder his progress on the spiritual path. By mixing prayers for the prophets along with a statement of sadness, there may be a deeper desire on the part of Ahmed Nurudin to create an alchemical transformation within his soul, one which would trigger a purificatory event, and would allow not happiness necessarily, but a transcendent state where the duality between happiness and sadness has lost all meaning.

Slab je koji traži,  
a slabo je i što se od njega traži.<sup>14</sup>

Weak is the one who seeks,  
and weak is that which is sought from them.

O MEN! A parable is set forth [herewith]; hearken, then, to it! Behold, those beings whom you invoke instead of God cannot create [as much as] a fly, even were they to join all their forces to that end! And if a fly robs them of anything, they cannot [even] rescue it from him! Weak indeed is the seeker, and [weak] the sought! (Qur'an XXII, 73)

The meaning of these changes is remarkably profound. Instead of the original meaning, stating that the pagan and their idols are weak, the revised version makes a general statement that all is pathetic. Looked at in terms of metaphysics, this is certainly true, for any seeker is seeking something greater, and therefore is paltry in relation to the sought. Here Selimović goes even further and says the sought-after is paltry as well. There is an ethical and metaphysical component to this statement. The ethical part could stand as a criticism of consumerism, because the things that are sought by the masses are paltry indeed! The metaphysical meaning of this line is that even a true seeker may search many years for truth and the hidden meaning of reality, but seeking itself is sometimes paltry, when the meaning of existence is within our own soul, but even if we seek our soul it is paltry compared to the Absolute. In addition, even that which is sought from the great luminaries is weak, because our only path to God is through our own Self.

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<sup>13</sup>Simone Weil. *Gravity and Grace*. London: Routledge, 2002, p. 115.

<sup>14</sup>Selimović, *Derviš i smrt*, p. 100.

“Vama vaši poslovi, meni moji.” Nije važno što ne činimo dobro, važno je da ne činimo zlo.<sup>15</sup>

“You mind your own business, and I’ll mind mine.” It does not matter that we are doing no good; what matters is that we commit no evil.

And say unto those who will not believe: “Do anything that may be within your power, [while] we, behold, shall labour [in God’s way][.]” (Qur’an XI, 121)

This verse should not be misunderstood as meaning that good deeds are useless, but instead should be interpreted as saying that in this decadent age, sometimes the best deed is no deed. This is remarkably reminiscent of the Daoist philosophy of *wuwei* (non acting action). If many individuals committed good deeds, but many others committed evil deeds in return, the world would be a very evil place, as it currently is, but if no one committed good deeds, and no one committed evil deeds, the world would be a much more peaceful place. Even the advent of civilization itself may be considered an evil deed. In fact, if one takes enough time to study archaeology and anthropology and learns to read the sacred texts symbolically and with an open mind, they may find that the fall from the gardens of paradise represents the period of human history when agriculture first began to be developed. Picking the apple or planting that first grain of wheat is what led us here to this present period of sedentary existences; existences lacking in time and beauty; existences where instead of our bodies being spiritualized, our souls are materialized, all in the service of the *great machine*.

Thought without action is sterile and useless, for even when one is concerned simply with their own salvation, they must act to make that a reality. Action without thought is foolish, for then one is indistinguishable from a tumbling rock; they move without rhyme or reason. Only when thought and action join together in praxis is true thought or true action possible. Action is the fire that forges thoughts like a good Japanese sword; bad thoughts shattering and good thoughts being made stronger. Thought is the necessary rational basis of all action. To act without thinking can only produce disastrous results. Those who retreat into the realm of thought, such as the mystics, must be willing to act in this world for the good of all humanity, for the soul of the mystic is the soul most capable of helping others with honor and honest intent. Those who act for others in this world must be willing to take some time unto themselves, in order to contemplate the deeper mysteries of life, which will in the end, make them able to better perform their deeds.

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<sup>15</sup>Selimović, op. cit., p. 119.

Koji vjeruju u Boga i sudnji dan, ne drže prijateljstvo s neprijateljima alaha i poslanika njegova, makar to bili očevi njihovi, ili braća njihova, ili rođaci njihovi.<sup>16</sup>

Those who believe in God and the Judgment Day do not cultivate friendship with the enemies of Allah and His prophet, even if they happen to be their fathers, their brothers, or their cousins.

Those who believe, and who have forsaken the domain of evil and have striven hard in God's cause with their possessions and their lives have the highest rank in the sight of God; and it is they, they who shall triumph [in the end]! (Qur'an IX, 20)

Say: "If your fathers and your sons and your brothers and your spouses and your clan, and the worldly goods which you have acquired, and the commerce whereof you fear a decline, and the dwellings in which you take pleasure—[if all these] are dearer to you than God and His Apostle and the struggle in His cause, then wait until God makes manifest His will; and [know that] God does not grace iniquitous folk with His guidance." (Qur'an IX, 24)

Selimović does not make much of a change in meaning here, but that does not mean that there is no deeper meaning to these verses. Ultimately, these verses are not referring to a specific banishment of one's family or other non-believers from one's life, but instead make the point that there are greater and subtler things that one should focus their energies on, such as truth, beauty, and goodness.

O pravovjerni, ne pitajte za stvari koje bi vas u brigu i očajanje mogle baciti, ako bi vam se otvoreno reklo.<sup>17</sup>

O you who have faith, do not ask about things, that if told to you directly, may bring woe and despair upon you.

O YOU who have attained to faith! Do not ask about matters which, if they were to be made manifest to you [in terms of law], might cause you hardship; for, if you should ask about them while the Qur'an is being revealed, they might [indeed] be made manifest to you [as laws]. God has absolved [you from any obligation] in this respect: for God is much-forgiving, forbearing. (Qur'an V, 101)

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<sup>16</sup>Selimović, op. cit., p. 126.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

This is an interesting change, for while Selimović keeps the verse generally intact, he changes the meaning from a verse about law to a verse about belief. Instead of speaking of the Islamic principle that a sin committed without intending a sin is no sin at all, Selimović cuts straight to the primary problem of our times: the problem of doubt. While doubt is healthy, and it may even be said that a believer is no believer at all without doubt, the modern world is filled with doubt to the point that the faithful are often considered weak-minded, or even mentally ill. In earlier times, if one experienced a dark night, they could return to the realm of faith simply by witnessing something as simple as a building, for most arts and sciences—and certainly architecture—in those days were attuned to the sacred. Now, if one questions too much, they may instead be led into a great chasm of despair, therefore in this period a simple yet sincere faith is called for, rather than an all encompassing meta-theology.

Teško onima koji ne vjeruju.<sup>18</sup>

Woe unto those who do not believe.

Woe on that Day unto those who give the lie to the truth[.] (Qur'an LXXXIII, 10)

A pathetic being is one who does not have faith outside of their faith in the reality of the material objects that present themselves before their eyes. Selimović's interpretation chooses to not limit this verse's applicability to the Day of Judgment, and rightly so. One without faith in the unknown or who lacks any spiritual understanding is simply as lost as a solitary piece of wood floating upon the sea. Even the wealthiest individual, who seemingly has it all, is poor compared to a poor and faithful person who has experienced the subtle taste of divine realities.

Ne može biti tajnog sporazumijevanja i sašaptavanja među trojicom a da Bog ne bude četvrti među njima. Tajni sastanci su satanino djelo, jer satana hoće da raštuži pravovjerne.<sup>19</sup>

There cannot be secret communication and whispers between three, without God being the fourth among them. Secret meetings are the work of the devil, because the devil wishes aggravation upon those who believe.

ART THOU NOT aware that God knows all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth?

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

Never can there be a secret confabulation between three persons without His being the fourth of them, nor between five without His being the sixth of them; and neither between less than that, or more, without His being with them wherever they may be. But in the end, on Resurrection Day, He will make them truly understand what they did: for, verily, God has full knowledge of everything. (Qur'an LVIII, 7)

[All other kinds of] secret confabulations are but of Satan's doing, so that he might cause grief to those who have attained to faith; yet he cannot harm them in the least, unless it be by God's leave: in God, then, let the believers place their trust! (Qur'an LVIII, 10)

Despite the supposed silence of God, He is all around us, in the air, the trees, the animals, and in every one of us, so whether we aim to do good or evil, God is there and everything is being weighed. One cannot play games with the Absolute, so despite their plots and their sly maneuvers, they can never escape God's field of vision. As such, one should always intend the best action so as to reap the purest karmic results, for God is infinitely merciful, but also infinitely just.

Ne budi pomagač i zaleđe nevjernicima!<sup>20</sup>

Do not be a helper to, nor watch the backs of those who do not believe!

O you who have attained to faith! Do not take the deniers of the truth for your allies in preference to the believers! Do you want to place before God a manifest proof of your guilt? (Qur'an IV, 144)

This verse is rather self-explanatory, but there is a deeper meaning that can be read into these words, namely that one should not help any infidel or any person who rebels against any faith, or faith in general, including oneself.

Ako su vam vaši očevi, vaši sinovi, vaša braća, vaše žene, vaše porodice, miliji od Boga, od njegovog poslanika i od borbe na njegovu putu, ne očekujte milost božiju.<sup>21</sup>

If your fathers, your sons, your brothers, your wives, and your families are dearer to you than God, His prophet, and the struggles on His path, do not expect God's mercy.

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Selimović, op. cit., p. 127.

Say: “If your fathers and your sons and your brothers and your spouses and your clan, and the worldly goods which you have acquired, and the commerce whereof you fear a decline, and the dwellings in which you take pleasure—[if all these] are dearer to you than God and His Apostle and the struggle in His cause, then wait until God makes manifest His will; and [know that] God does not grace iniquitous folk with His guidance.” (Qur’an IX, 24)

This is quite intriguing, because the actual Qur’anic text states that non-righteous individuals will not receive guidance, but Selimović’s interpretation is that the evil ones cannot only expect no guidance, but no mercy as well! One of the principal tenants of Islam is that God is all merciful and compassionate, so we must ask ourselves why Selimović seemingly goes against such a fundamental principle. The reason, it would seem, is that his brother was killed unjustly, so Selimović is perhaps hoping that his brother’s killer faces justice and does not receive mercy.

O pravovjerni, klonite se sumnjičenja i klevetanja, jer kleveta i sumnjičenje je grijeh.<sup>22</sup>

O, you who are faithful, stay away from slander and suspicion, for slander and suspicion are sins.

O you who have attained to faith! Do not raise your voices above the voice of the Prophet, and neither speak loudly to him, as you would speak loudly to one another, lest all your [good] deeds come to nought without your perceiving it. (Qur’an XLIX, 2)

Selimović is not in any way deviating from Islamic principles here despite his stylistic changes. It is a cardinal principal of Islam that one should not suspect others of misdeeds, let alone slander or backbite against them. One may be an evil person, but that is between them and God, unless their evil is made manifest; therefore, in the name of protecting the community from strife, slander and backbiting are considered major sins.

Nisu za grijешnicima plakali ni nebo ni zemlja...<sup>23</sup>

Neither the skies nor the earth have cried for the sinners...

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

[A]nd neither sky nor earth shed tears over them, nor were they allowed a respite. (Qur'an XLIV, 29)

While some in the Muslim community, including many followers of 'Ashari theology<sup>24</sup>, consider actions to be predestined, this is a severe metaphysical error. The error of predestination, which was largely upheld by Protestant Christians was at least partially responsible for the advent of capitalism. People who consider themselves to already be saved or damned can commit the worst atrocities. Here we see that predestination is not an Islamic doctrine: the sky and Earth did not weep for the sinners, because those sinners were born with free will and chose their wicked path in life.

Zaista biće nesrećan ko dušu svoju okalja...<sup>25</sup>

And truly, calamity will fall upon the tarnished soul...

[A]nd truly lost is he who buries it [in darkness]. (Qur'an XCI, 10)

Selimović is here taking the same concept as the Qur'anic verse, but expands upon it. One who defiles their soul becomes lost, damned, and unhappy. Now, one with a defiled soul may appear very happy even if they have committed the worst deeds, but that is a certain material happiness. It is not without reason that many people become depressed or commit suicide after winning the lottery. All of the riches in the world cannot grant the peace and serenity that comes along with sincere faith or mystic realization of the divine mysteries.

O, Zulkarnejne, Jedžudž i Medžudž prave smutnju po zemlji... Zaišta biće nesrećan ko dušu svoju okalja...<sup>26</sup>

O, Cyrus, Gog and Magog are creating strife all over the earth... And truly, calamity will fall upon the tarnished soul...

They said: "O thou Two-Horned One! Behold, Gog and Magog are spoiling this land. May we, then, pay unto thee a tribute on the understanding that thou wilt erect a barrier between us and them?" (Qur'an XVIII, 94)

This is continuing Selimović's last interpretation regarding unhappiness, but in addition to that he makes a statement regarding truth that throughout much of human history would seem commonplace, but in the era called postmodernism it is, in

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<sup>24</sup>One of the two primary Sunni Muslims theological systems. The emphasis on destiny to the exclusion of justice bears a certain resemblance to the Lutheran and Calvinist theologies.

<sup>25</sup>Selimović, *Derviš i smrt*, p. 127.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

faĉt, a minority opinion, at least among the intelligentsia. Modernism shrank truth to the size of a pea, and so-called postmodernism finished this project that Descartes started. The statement that “there is truth, and there is also error”, though radically simple, is perhaps the most important statement for our times.

Pored istine poŝtoji zabluda... Neka ljudi oproŝte i smiluju se, zar vi ne ŝelite da vama Bog oproŝti?... Zaiŝta je ĉovjek veliki nasilnik, a nasilnici su najdalje od istine [...] Teŝko tebi, teŝko tebi, i opet teŝko tebi! [...] Allah je svaĉije utoĉiŝte.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to truth, there exists deception... May people forgive and be merciful to one another; don't you want God to forgive you? The human is a truly great tyrant, and tyrants are far from the truth... Woe upon you, woe upon you, and woe upon you again!... Allah is a refuge for all.

And [always] does He give you something out of what you may be asking of Him; and should you try to count God's blessings, you could never compute them.

[And yet,] behold, man is indeed most persistent in wrongdoing, stubbornly ingrate! (Qur'an XIV, 34)

This is one of the most important of Selimović's interpretations. The Qur'an makes the point that God is infinitely merciful and gives humans much good that they request and further good that they don't request. God, according to this verse of the Qur'an, bestows many great things to the humans, even though they do not deserve it. Selimović also emphasizes God's mercy, but he makes it contingent upon each person's and each community's mercy to their fellow travelers on this rotating and orbiting spaceship called Earth. If one desires salvation and God's mercy, they should be merciful as well. The masses may simply view this as a basic rule or law they should follow, but the symbolic import here is twofold:

1. Each being is sacred and must be treated as such, and,
2. One must always strive to embody each of God's attributes and names. If one's heart assimilates the divine attribute of mercy, they cannot help but be merciful.

Humanity could be said to be wicked, but not in nature since our nature is divine. A human who rules a state or nation, but exercises no mercy may seem important within this material realm, but in God's eyes a simple homeless beggar who gives some of their food to feed a dog is an infinitely greater person.

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

Ne tugujte, radujte se raju  
koji vam je obećan.<sup>28</sup>

Do not be in sorrow, look forward to the paradise  
that you have been promised.

[But,] behold, as for those who say, “Our Sustainer is God,” and then  
steadfastly pursue the right way—upon them do angels often descend,  
[saying:] “Fear not and grieve not, but receive the glad tidings of that par-  
adise which has been promised to you! [”] (Qur’an XLI, 25)

In this verse Selimović is staying close to the Qur’anic meaning, which is simple  
and direct: do not despair that this world is cruel, because if you are good and believe,  
you will see better things in higher realms.

Moj Bože, ja nemam nikoga  
osim tebe i brata mojega.<sup>29</sup>

My God, I have no one  
except You and my brother.

Prayed [Moses]: “O my Sustainer! Of none am I master but of myself  
and my brother [Aaron]: draw Thou, then, a dividing-line between us  
and these iniquitous folk!” (Qur’an V, 25)

This is an intriguing interpretation, though it makes sense once one realizes that  
not only does Ahmed lose his brother in the novel, but Selimović loŝt his brother  
as well. We are all alone here on this planet, and even those few people we love and  
think we can count on can leave at a moment’s notice. If one has no one besides their  
brother, sister, spouse, parents, or even the whole of society, they still have no one  
because either they will leave us or we will leave them. That is the nature of mortality  
and the human condition. Due to this, we could really say “my God, I have no one  
but You.”

Čuvajte se veze rodbinske, naredio je alah.<sup>30</sup>

Beware of family connections, Allah has ordered.

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<sup>28</sup>Selimović, op. cit., p. 129.

<sup>29</sup>Selimović, op. cit., p. 158.

<sup>30</sup>Selimović, op. cit., p. 172.

And give his due to the near of kin, as well as to the needy and the wayfarer, but do not squander [thy substance] senselessly. (Qur'an XVII, 25)

The meaning here is similar, though Selimović chooses not to end with the qualification about squandering possessions. Selimović was a communist, and he fought with Tito's Partisans against fascist incursions into the Balkans. Knowing this, one could say that he was making a statement that one should give freely to their kinsmen, fellow believers, and fellow fighters for good, for hoarding is a sin, but the clearest meaning of Selimović's interpretation is simply that one should beware all connections in this life, including family ties, because they can take us away from the path of God.

Moj Bože! Daj mi pomoćnika od bližnjih mojih, Haruna, brata mojega, ojačaj njime snagu moju. Učini mi brata pomoćnikom u poslu mome.<sup>31</sup>

My God! Grant me a helper from my kin, grant me my brother Harun, and make me stronger through him. Make my brother a helper in my work.

Said [Moses]: "O my Sustainer! Open up my heart [to Thy light], (Qur'an XX, 25) and appoint for me, out of my kinsfolk, one who will help me to bear my burden: Aaron, my brother. Add Thou through him to my strength, and let him share my task[.] (Qur'an XX 29-32)

Unsurprisingly, Selimović again chooses a verse mentioning a brother. This could be a plea, a prayer from Selimović, to be reunited with his own brother.

Jao meni, zar ne mogu učiniti ni koliko vrana da zakopam tijelo mrtvoga brata svoga?<sup>32</sup>

Woe be upon me! Can't I do as much as a crow to bury my dead brother?

[S]ave for such [of them] as repent ere you [O believers] become more powerful than they: for you must know that God is much-forgiving, a dispenser of grace. (Qur'an V, 34)

Here Selimović is taking a great deal of liberty with the text, making the Qur'an speak directly about Ahmed's and his own shock and horror that their brother was

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Selimović, op. cit., p. 173.

exterminated by an evil force, and they could not even perform proper burial rites, since that was taken care of by the same state apparatus that killed the brother in the first place. Here we see Ahmed pleading before God, asking why we are so insignificant and powerless.

Raštavi mene i njih, i sudi nam.<sup>33</sup>

Separate me from them, and then you can judge us.

[Whereupon] he prayed: “O my Sustainer! Behold, my people have given me the lie: hence, lay Thou wide open the truth between me and them, and save me and those of the believers who are with me!” (Qur’an XXVI 117-18)

Selimović makes a stylistic change here that creates a sense of awe in the reader. First, he asks for separation, then to be judged collectively. It seems that while acknowledging difference, and claiming moral superiority, this verse implicitly acknowledges the speaker as deeply flawed as well.

Naš Bože, tražimo oprostenje tvoje.

Veliki naš Bože, ne kazni nas ako zaboravimo ili pogriješimo.

Veliki naš Bože, ne zaduži nas teretom preteškim za nas.

Veliki naš Bože, ne obavezuj nas onim što podnijeti i izvršiti ne možemo.

Oprošti nam, smiluj se i osnaži nas.<sup>34</sup>

Our dear Lord, we request your forgiveness.

Our great Lord, save us from punishment if we forget or make a mistake.

Our great Lord, do not give us a burden that is too heavy for us.

Our great Lord, do not expect of us that which we cannot bear and execute.

Grant us forgiveness, have mercy upon us, and make us stronger.

THE APOSTLE, and the believers with him, believe in what has been bestowed upon him from on high by his Sustainer: they all believe in God, and His angels, and His revelations, and His apostles, making no distinction between any of His apostles; and they say: “We have heard, and we pay heed. Grant us Thy forgiveness, O our Sustainer, for with Thee is all journeys’ end! “God does not burden any human being with

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

more than he is well able to bear: in his favour shall be whatever good he does, and against him whatever evil he does. "O our Sustainer! Take us not to task if we forget or unwittingly do wrong! "O our Sustainer! Lay not upon us a burden such as Thou didst lay upon those who lived before us! O our Sustainer! Make us not bear burdens which we have no strength to bear! "And efface Thou our sins, and grant us forgiveness, and bestow Thy mercy upon us! Thou art our Lord Supreme: succour us, then, against people who deny the truth!" (Qur'an II, 285-86)

This verse is turned into a prayer by Selimović, and such a great prayer it is. In its few short and pithy lines, Selimović has captured the essence of a trans-religious prayer of petition. The basic statements of this prayer are as follows:

- Asking God to forgive our sins. We are all flawed and all have sinned, so any prayer should begin this way, especially so we recite the following verses in a purified state;
- Intention is the basis of judgment. We ask God to forgive us if we sin unintentionally or forgetfully, but also, we ask God to forgive us if we commit sins with full intentionality. We should be forgiven for mistakes founded upon ignorance, but we must also ask forgiveness for intentional sins, since God is primarily merciful and to doubt this is to doubt the essence of God;
- Life is difficult, and a life that is too difficult can hinder spiritual progress, so we plead with God to make life bearable;
- We ask God to be lenient with us. We are living in a decadent age and many formerly simple religious duties are no longer easily accomplished, so we beg God to judge us accordingly, and
- We ask for our sins to be forgiven, for our lives to be showered with mercy, and for the strength to handle any ordeal we may encounter in life.

Sve što možete protiv mene učiniti, učinite,  
ne dajte mi ni trenutka predaha.<sup>35</sup>

Anything you can do against me, go ahead,  
grant me not a single moment of respite.

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<sup>35</sup>Selimović, op. cit., p. 175.

[...]beside Him! Contrive, then, [anything that you may wish] against me, all of you, and give me no respite! (Qur'an XI, 55)

Selimović's particular interpretation of this verse is not completely clear, though it may be directed at wrongdoers, making a statement that no matter what they do, they will not be victorious. On the other hand, it could be directed at God, meaning that the speaker is determined to pass the test, which is life on this world.

Kada se zbude veliki događaj, nekog će uzvisiti, nekog uniziti. Kada se zemlja žeštoko potrese, biće vas tri vrste.<sup>36</sup>

When upon you comes a Great Event, some will ascend, and others will descend. When the earth shakes in furious tides, you will be separated into one of three types.

WHEN THAT which must come to pass [at last] comes to pass, there will be nought that could give the lie to its having come to pass, abasing [some], exalting [others]! When the earth is shaken with a shaking [severe], and the mountains are shattered into [countless] shards, so that they become as scattered dust[.] (Qur'an LVI, 1-6)

The most interesting part of Selimović's interpretation is his use of the term "types". We are given no further information, but one could guess that roles will be reversed and those that had the most here on Earth may be the lowest class on the Day of Judgment. What are the three types? The types could correspond to the triadic Hegelian dialectic, the three basic states of Islamic eschatology (heaven, hell, and barzakh), or to the cosmological levels of Lahut (divinity), malakut (imagination), and nasut (humanity). As the well-known saying states: It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, than for one of the wealthy classes to enter heaven, but ultimately and most simply the three types can stand for those purely good, those purely evil, and those embodying both attributes.

I drugovi s desne strane su drugovi u sreći. Sjede ispod plodnog drveta lotosova što nema bodljika, i pod bananama što im plodovi vise u grozdovima, i u hladu što se široko razastro pored vode što bištra teče, i u obilju voća što ga nikad ne neštaje, niti se zabranjuje, odmaraju se na visokim ležajima.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>Selimović, op. cit., p. 193.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

And companions from the right side are companions in happiness. They sit under a bountiful, thorn-free lotus tree, and under a banana tree whose fruits are hanging in clusters, and in the abundant shade that has spread itself next to the water, which flows in all its purity; and among an abundance of fruit which never goes away, nor is forbidden, they are laying on elevated hammocks.

Thus, there shall be such as will have attained to what is right: oh, how [happy] will be they who have attained to what is right! And there shall be such as will have lost themselves in evil: oh, how [unhappy] will be they who have lost themselves in evil! But the foremost shall be [they who in life were] the foremost [in faith and good works]: they who were [always] drawn close unto God! In gardens of bliss [will they dwell]—a good many of those of olden times, but [only] a few of later times. [They will be seated] on gold-encrusted thrones of happiness, reclining upon them, facing one another [in love]. Immortal youths will wait upon them with goblets, and ewers, and cups filled with water from unsullied springs by which their minds will not be clouded and which will not make them drunk; and with fruit of any kind that they may choose, and with the flesh of any fowl that they may desire. And [with them will be their] companions pure, most beautiful of eye, most beautiful of eye like unto pearls [still] hidden in their shells. [And this will be] a reward for what they did [in life]. No empty talk will they hear there, nor any call to sin, but only the tiding of inner soundness and peace. NOW AS FOR those who have attained to righteousness—what of those who have attained to righteousness? [They, too, will find themselves] amidst fruit-laden lote-trees, and acacias flower-clad, and shade extended, and waters gushing, and fruit abounding, never-failing and never out of reach. And [with them will be their] spouses, raised high[.] (Qur'an LVI, 8-34)

Considering how controversial the interpretation of this verse has been, we may do well to heed Selimović's interpretation. There is no mention here of partners with beautiful eyes and purity. This is a description of paradise, and as such it is meant as an idea, but we shouldn't take any of this too literally. Each person's paradise would be somewhat different, but any such description in terms of material pleasures is meant less as an objectively true statement and more as a symbolic representation of the greatness of Heaven, which is pleasurable beyond any human conception, but is also ineffable and is a pleasure of a spiritual—not a material nature.

A kako je teško jadnicima koje je zadesila nesreća! Njihovo mješto je u užarenom ognju i ključaloj vodi u magli tmaštog i crnog dima, koji nije ugodan ni lijep. –Ješćete gorke plodove drveta zekum, i pićete ključalu vodu. Pićete kao prežednjele deve. Mi smo odredili da među vama caruje smrt, a naša moć je velika, i biće tako.<sup>38</sup>

How miserable are the wretches struck by misfortune! Their fate is incandescent fire and boiling water enveloped in the haze of dark, black smoke, neither pleasant nor beautiful. You will eat the bitter fruit of the Zaqqum tree, and you will be drinking boiling water. You will drink as a thirsty camel drinks. We have determined that death rules among you, and our power is immense, and so it shall be.

BUT AS FOR those who have persevered in evil—what of those who have persevered in evil? [They will find themselves] in the midst of scorching winds, and burning despair, and the shadows of black smoke[,] (Qur'an LVI, 41-44) and then, verily, O you who have gone astray and called the truth a lie, you will indeed have to taste of the tree of deadly fruit, and will have to fill your bellies therewith, and will thereupon have to drink [many a draught] of burning despair—drink it as the most insatiably thirsty camels drink! (Qur'an LVI, 51-55)

We have [indeed] decreed that death shall be [ever-present] among you: but there is nothing to prevent Us from changing the nature of your existence and bringing you into being [anew] in a manner [as yet] unknown to you. (Qur'an LVI, 60-61)

Selimović does not make any profound changes here, but he does reword the verses. The way Selimović rewords these verses and the reason he chose these particular lines is probably due to his brother. Selimović wanted nothing more than to see justice carried out upon his brother's executioners. One possible interpretation of these verses is as an allegory and prophetic description of the future (at the time of the Qur'an's revelation). The future is now and suddenly, without many people realizing it, we live in Hell on Earth. We now live in a nuclear age where the soil is scorched and the seas are turning into boiling pits of despair for all living thing; humans are so greedy and gluttonous that they truly eat and drink like starving animals; we are all going towards that stage where we are transformed into the most wretched forms—cyborgs,...—inevitable for a species that brought all of this misfortune upon themselves and the planet; and death rules among us, since we can never escape it.

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<sup>38</sup>Selimović, op. cit., p. 194.

The desire to develop more and more technology can be viewed as a way of achieving immortality. People think they can outsmart God, but the joke is on them. They find only ugliness, horror, and despair, when, if they followed the path of God, they would taste only bliss.

Reći će nesrećni izabranima: Čekajte da malo uzmemo od svjetla vašega! Odgovoriće im se: Vратиće se, i tražite sebi svjetlo. Onda će se između njih podići zid, unutra će biti milošt, izvan zida patnja. Vikaće oni izvana: Zar nismo bili s vama?

Vas čekaju vrtovi rajski, u kojima rijeke teku.<sup>39</sup>

And then the wretched will say unto the chosen: Wait, and allow us to take some of your light! And they will hear: Return, and search for your own light. Then a wall will emerge between them, with mercy on the inside, and suffering outside of the wall. The wretched outsiders will cry: Were we not together with you?

Heavenly gardens through which rivers flow await you.

On that Day shall the hypocrites, both men and women, speak [thus] unto those who have attained to faith: “Wait for us! Let us have a [ray of] light from your light!” [But] they will be told: “Turn back, and seek a light [of your own]!” And thereupon a wall will be raised between them [and the believers], with a gate in it: within it will be grace and mercy, and against the outside thereof, suffering. They [who will remain without] will call out to those [within], “Were we not with you?”—[to which] the others will answer: “So it was! But you allowed yourselves to succumb to temptation, and you were hesitant [in your faith], and you were doubtful [of resurrection]; and your wishful thinking beguiled you until God’s command came to pass: for, [indeed, your own] deceptive thoughts about God deluded you! (Qur’an LVII, 13-14)

Again, Selimović does not greatly alter these verses. These verses are of great importance and have a subtle metaphysical meaning. The light that the unfortunate want is not, as it appears, the light of the individuals, but the light of God; a light that was made manifest even to the staunchest of atheists, but after seeing this light, they are walled off from it in darkness, for there is no punishment greater than being distanced from God.

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

Pokoravajte se Bogu i poslaniku i onima koji vašim poslovima upravljaju.<sup>40</sup>

Yield to God and His prophet, and to those who administer your business.

O you who have attained to faith! Pay heed unto God, and pay heed unto the Apostle and unto those from among you who have been entrusted with authority; and if you are at variance over any matter, refer it unto God and the Apostle, if you [truly] believe in God and the Last Day. This is the best [for you], and best in the end. (Qur'an IV, 59)

Little commentary is needed upon this verse, which Selimović shortened, but without changing the clear meaning. Ultimately, one must realize that their life is as much in the hands of others as in their own hands. A thinking person must, therefore, put the fate of their soul in the hands of God and His prophet(s). This world is transitory, so we must be somewhat aloof, preferring a path of poverty and seclusion to the worldly life.

Biće nesrećan  
koji svoju dušu okalja.<sup>41</sup>

Calamity will fall  
upon the tarnished soul.

[A]nd truly lost is he who buries it [in darkness]. (Qur'an XCI, 10)

This is a repetition of an already mentioned verse. It is emphasized both to point out the eventual unhappiness the executioners of Ahmed's and Selimović's brother will face, but it also is an expression of Ahmed's own feelings of sinfulness and melancholy.

Široka zemlja im je postala tijesna,  
srca su im osjetila usamljenost i tjeskobu.<sup>42</sup>

The expansive land has become too narrow for them,  
their hearts have felt solitude and anxiety.

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<sup>40</sup>Selimović, op. cit., p. 199.

<sup>41</sup>Selimović, op. cit., p. 207.

<sup>42</sup>Selimović, op. cit., p. 241.

And [He turned in His mercy, too,] towards the three [groups of believers] who had fallen prey to corruption, until in the end—after the earth, despite all its vastness, had become [too] narrow for them and their souls had become [utterly] constricted—they came to know with certainty that there is no refuge from God other than [a return] unto Him; and thereupon He turned again unto them in His mercy, so that they might repent: for, verily, God alone is an acceptor of repentance, a dispenser of grace. (Qur'an IX, 118)

Once again, we turn to an interesting interpretation of Selimović. Aside from the original Qur'anic meaning, there are now other possible interpretations. One of the primary ways of looking at this is that humanity, by forgetting God and all that is important in their lives, have focused on industry and an endless quest for production, which has squeezed the world, destroyed much of nature, and led to massive overpopulation. All of this has resulted in depression, loneliness, and anxiety. One may live in a city full of people, but not really know anyone. In the modern world everyone is a stranger to everyone else, even to themselves. Gone are the days of traditional art, architecture, and work that satisfied one's soul. We now simply work at a job that makes us feel inhuman, then go to a house, not that we built by our own hands, but one that is owned by a bank and looks like thousands of other mass-produced houses in suburbia. We have no time for anything except for sleep. The sum of human ingenuity has failed to make the quality of life better, but only to steal more of our time for more frivolous matters.

Ne smatrajte mrtvima one  
koji su na božjem putu ubijeni.<sup>43</sup>

Do not regard as dead  
those who are killed on God's path.

But do not think of those that have been slain in God's cause as dead.  
Nay, they are alive! With their Sustainer have they their sustenance[.]  
(Qur'an III, 169)

Selimović here is most likely, again, referring to his brother. It is meant as both a metaphysical statement of great importance and as a self-assurance. It does not mean, as has often been said, that this applies only to martyrs in the lesser *jihad*, but instead it applies to any Muslim, and in fact any believer who dies with belief in their heart, for belief, particularly in this age of doubt, is the hardest struggle of all.

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<sup>43</sup>Selimović, op. cit., p. 247.

Lijepa riječ je kao lijepo stablo, korijen mu je duboko u zemlji, a grane se pod nebo uzdižu.<sup>44</sup>

A beautiful word is like a beautiful tree: its roots are deep in the ground, and its branches reach up to the sky.

ART THOU NOT aware how God sets forth the parable of a good word? [It is] like a good tree, firmly rooted, [reaching out] with its branches towards the sky[.] (Qur'an XIV, 24)

The meaning of this interpretation is twofold:

1. The beautiful word is the Qur'an, which embodies verticality, and is a scripture that can transport one from the world of the roots to the world of the branches, or from the realm of matter to the realm of the spirit;
2. Any word, if written or spoken with beauty, has a special transformative power. In addition, a good word said to one's enemy cannot only change the consciousness of the enemy, but purify one's own soul.

Reci: došla je Iština!<sup>45</sup>

Say: The Truth has arrived!

And say: "The truth has now come [to light], and falsehood has withered away: for, behold, all falsehood is bound to wither away!" (Qur'an XVII, 81)

This verse is placed near the end of the novel because the time had come for decisions and for separating the real from the unreal. We must always repeat this line, because the hour of truth is not sometime in the distant future, but now! Every second is the moment of truth and if we would simply slow down and realize that we must live in the present we would, perhaps, see that every action, no matter how small, effects both the rest of our worldly life and our soul's journey beyond.

Iština je moja. Istinu ja govorim.<sup>46</sup>

The Truth is mine. I speak the Truth.

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<sup>44</sup>Selimović, op. cit., p. 266.

<sup>45</sup>Selimović, op. cit., p. 302.

<sup>46</sup>Selimović, op. cit., p. 321.

[And God] said: “This, then, is the truth! And this truth do I state[.]”  
(Qur’an XXXVIII, 84)

Here we come to a point at which Ahmed, who is reciting this verse, seems to be echoing Hallaj’s “I am the Truth”. If one owns the truth and speaks the truth, then it would not be much of a jump to say that they are the truth. As such, one interpretation is that Ahmed, after all his trials and tribulations, has reached the truth and achieved a mystical union with God. If we read *The Dervish and Death* as a standard novel, this may make no sense, but perhaps it is more than a novel; it may in fact be Selimović’s Sufi manual for moderns, and if so, the natural end cannot be anything else but union.

Toga dana mi ćemo reći paklu: Jesi li se napunio?  
A pakao će odgovoriti: Ima li još?<sup>47</sup>

That day we will say to Hell: Are you still hungry?  
And to that, Hell will respond: Feed me more!

On that Day We will ask hell, “Art thou filled?”—and it will answer,  
“[Nay,] is there yet more [for me]?” (Qur’an L, 30)

The final new interpretation (the final verses being the same that started the novel) is this, which stands in contrast to the preceding verse. It seems that Selimović turns from absolute truth to a certain kind of doubt, but it should not be considered the skeptic doubt that most of us feel, but the knowledge that one knows nothing compared to God, along with the knowledge that arrogance is a sin, so one should never claim salvation for themselves—something even the prophets never did—but instead resign themselves to the will of God the *all powerful*, with faith that He is also *all merciful*, and *all compassionate*. Hell is always hungry, and Hell will have more food as the ages progress. The Kali Yuga<sup>48</sup> is the period of cyclical history in which people have lost touch with their Lord and Creator. People now either follow religions which are no religions at all, being based as they are on the twin principles of materialism and fundamentalism, or they follow the path of nihilism. This is to their own peril, for they will not be sharing a feast with the gods, but will be tasty morsels that the Devil endlessly feeds upon.

Svojom rukom napisao Hasan  
sin Alijin:

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<sup>47</sup>Selimović, op. cit., p. 340.

<sup>48</sup>Iron age or end times.

Nisam znao da je bio toliko  
nesrećan.  
Mir njegovoj namučenoj duši.  
1962-1966.<sup>49</sup>

Written by Hasan, the son of Alija, with his own hand:  
I was not aware that he was so  
unhappy.  
Peace be upon his tormented soul!  
1962-1966

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<sup>49</sup>Selimović, *Derviš i smrt*, p. 384.

## Chapter 5

# Buddhist Mind, Western Literature

*Liberty Kohn*

### 5.1 Teaching Western Creativity and Dharma, Separately

I was sitting on my desk, spine straight as string, lecturing to twenty-five students, when I realized that my teaching subject, Western creative writing, was not congruent with the dharma. Ashlyn, a 6'2 Education major with eyes like smoked glass was chewing gum patiently in a desk by the back wall. Ashlyn hated getting Bs and wrote down nearly everything I said. Reese, a cable-framed twenty-three year old veteran who wore only camouflage and T-shirts, had asked a question from his huddled posture in the front row. I heard myself replying, "Conflict. You have to have conflict in literature. Without conflict, your dramatic writing will not keep your readers' interest. Even Disney movies with talking hamsters have talking hamsters in conflict."

The class laughed, but the laughs were unsure, like thin glass that breaks with just a little too much of the hand's investigation. Despite the chuckles my fictional, suffering hamsters garnered, the class and I had also discovered the sometimes wormy center of Western art. I had taught plenty of writing classes, but never *creative writing*, which focuses on literary writing. I did not expect that upon the standard advice, that literature requires conflict, that my students would look let down and quite wormy themselves. This secret knowledge wasn't very good, I imagine. Conflict and drama may send our hearts racing in the darkness of the cinema, but conflict doesn't hold much promise for the artist in process. Nor does conflict suggest a path for one seeking development and awareness through creativity.

Why, you may be wondering, is conflict a centerpiece of literature? Aristotle writes in his *Poetics* (circa 330 BCE) the trajectory for good drama: conflict without resolution

produces tension, which is, essentially, high human drama. Twenty-four centuries later, tension remains the core of Western drama and fiction, and a very modern and muscular Aristotle grooms our cultural landscape. Consider our fascination with TV police chases and our outlaw heroes. Consider our love of slow-boiling bad cops who cross the line. Reflect on our crops of cartoon animals, their appeal defined through their all too human attachments and anxieties. Do not forget our kitchen sink dramas, *Lifetime* movies of the week, or *Real Housewives*. Our heroes and entertainments are often stuck in the mud of *samsara* while nearby, on Hollywood's cutting room floor, the possibilities of tranquility and quietude gently pool, never to become part of our entertainment or education.

Just several lifetimes before Aristotle wrote his *Poetics*, the Buddha was also discussing conflict. This wisdom comes from the 100-102nd verse of the *Dhammapada*:

Better than a thousand meaningless statements  
Is one meaningful word,  
Which, having been heard,  
Brings peace.

Better than a thousand meaningless verses  
Is one meaningful line of verse  
Which, having been heard,  
Brings peace.

Better than reciting a hundred meaningless verses  
Is one line of Dharma  
Which, having been heard,  
Brings peace.

The Buddha's focus is clearly on training the attentions, not prolonging conflict to create suspense. For the Buddha, verse is meaningless unless it leads to peace for speaker and listener. To be fair to Aristotle, he saw the best drama as requiring *peripeteia*, a tragic reversal in the hero's fortune that primed the audience to recognize the awe of their humanity. This focused reflection on humanity lends Aristotle's literary "how-to" a foundation in sublime awe, but sublimity and awe are not mindfulness. Mindfulness requires dharma, and with dharma, sangha. But the idea of performer and audience is quite distinct from that of sangha. Sangha requires community, whereas Western heroes and their audience can remain each alone during *peripeteia*. Despite Aristotle's championing of the awesome powers of fate, Western traditions threaten to leave a participant with only the chill of fickle fate, the winds of powerlessness, and the echoes of awe without enlightenment.

The Western idea of audience is, at best, social, and certainly not psychological. Chogyam Trungpa reveals that “an artist may tell us that he simply composed his poem because he felt that way. But if that’s the case, why should he write it down on a piece of paper and date it? If it’s purely for himself, it does not need to be recorded. [...] A work of art from that point of view is exhibition.” In the Buddhist view, the creative process can function without the idea of audience. Only audience-intentional art could be based in a need for celebrity or recognition. In the West, both famous artists and unknown artists often remain “tortured artists.” However, equating “artist” with “torture” speaks the name of only fickle fate and human powerlessness. Art should make one less tortured, not more tortured. Even the framework of awe the Greeks found desirable falls away at this point. In the “tortured artist” philosophy, creation must not be an end to suffering, lest the impulse for creativity end altogether.

You may be saying “all art illustrates some form of ego and a world temporarily in chaos and disorder.” And this is true. But in this way, all art is a mixture of form and dharma. Dharma takes forms so as to lead into a world of non-formation: art is meditation that reorders our real and fictional worlds. Haiku, for instance, can be object meditation turned to art. Witness Japanese Zen poet Issa choosing the samsara of humans and flies to give form to insight:

Where there are humans  
You’ll find flies—  
And Buddhas.

Here is Issa again, this time meditating on bathing, to move past the patterns and ego that challenge us daily:

One bath  
After another—  
How stupid.

Issa tries to take us beyond the senseless exhibition of cleanliness that changes neither the world nor ourselves. In an act as simple as bathing, we see that the Western ego sometimes asks us to create for the purpose of exhibition. In Buddhism, a return to order happens only through the loss of ego. Naturally, bathing is not bad, but bathing to meet others’ expectations is. Witness Basho to a student:

Don’t imitate me—  
It’s as boring  
as the two halves of a melon.

What is imitation but the desire for permanence and acceptance? Imitation can be a product of fear, of a lack of willingness to engage in discovery. We avoid mindfulness if we imitate the past and carry our fears forward. Basho teaches us this, even when talking to himself:

Life in this world—  
a makeshift hut  
like Sogi's.

Just as the West does not conceive of a desirable life as temporary, as a makeshift hut like Sogi's, a makeshift hut is not a proper metaphor for Western art and literature. We Westerners prefer things that are more permanent than huts—Roman coliseums, signature artists, or the certitude of statistics. We prefer not the sage sitting in silence, but the ego's ever-continuing movement on an epic or foolhardy plot. Think of JFK's commitment to ceaseless journeying, that of putting a man on the moon. Buddhists have no need to put a man on the moon. Mindful Buddhists bring the moon wherever they go.

It is true that plot happens in Zen koans as in Western storytelling. But there is an easy difference: as Western moviegoers with expectations for conflict, we should wonder what it would be like to view a film with Buddhist principles of art. For instance, how might we watch a film based upon Seng Ts'an's teaching that the Way is not difficult for one who has no expectations. I suspect that watching a film with no expectations would be a confusing to impossible experience for our inner-Hollywood moviegoer! But if we imagine an ancient parallel of cinema, the traditional Asian tapestry depicting country village life, we lose ourselves in the ornate tranquility of the beautifully woven woods, the placid river, and makeshift huts. In these tapestries we often see tiny figures who are not lost in their ego. They are lost in their daily activities of cooking, cleaning, fishing, and meditating. Clearly the Way exists through the practices of those well-stitched figures and actions woven so intricately into the scenery that binds them.

As I said, Western art is no makeshift hut. *Oedipus Rex*, *Hamlet*, and *The Bible* are valuable because they are "timeless." Nothing is timeless in Buddhism. Everything is temporary. Timelessness is the opposite of emptiness. Be Here Now challenges the very idea of timelessness. Visualize Western art as a line that runs forever: you have existence as timelessness. Now visualize Be Here Now as not a line, but a small point. Then imagine no-line and no-point. Or stop trying to use lines and dots to define consciousness: you have emptiness.

The Be Here Now of Buddhist art is perhaps best understood through the non-figural, geometric mandala. The mandala's brightly colored and intricate design does

not depict the human body or epic journey. Mandalas are not based in ego or human activity. They are a gateway to move beyond human activity into the unconscious. The painted sand mandala is temporary by nature. Its symbolic nature is most ripe when blowing away in a gentle wind, never to exist in previous form again. Western art, too, can deliver the idea that art is temporary and experienced, yet the material expressing these sentiments might be pinned to a museum wall or housed in a guardian library. Even the West's "low art," whether Warhol's soup cans or our children's finger paintings, gets hung up "for keeps" on our walls and refrigerators.

If it seems like I promote the stark refusal of sentimentality, I do not. Both creation and meditation are the basis of loving kindness. In art, as in all things, we must recognize that it is the *approach* or *perception* that defines our Western or Buddhist outlook. To discover the Way, to find enlightenment, makers should not matter. Fame should not matter. Makers' intentions should not matter. A prized 17th century Flemish landscape and a child's finger paintings are equally valuable. Both lead the student toward a greater awareness, and both can be used to reveal the levels of the unconscious.

As I closed down my writing course many afternoons, I found myself laughing about my teaching of conflict, and I asked my students to join me. We wondered aloud what non-conflict art might look like, what it might feel like, and why people may find it rewarding. I presented my students with sound puzzles that were to be solved through their poetry's music brooding in our ears. My students wrote beautiful passages that contained very little conflict, and I praised the craft of these passages. The students found these passages meaningful as well, and we discussed the passages relationship with the more "Western" one-act plays and short stories they had written.

So what should we do with Aristotle's advice? Dharma practice would suggest reading Buddhist principles into even ego-driven art. In dharma practice, the activities and motivations of plot and character would become the objects of meditation. Such objects are ripe for harmony, but not a guarantor of harmony. Dharma harmony lives in the mind of the practitioner.

Why did my students look so wormy during our opening days together? Chogyam Trungpa explains such estrangement when outlining the difference between mindfulness and awareness. In practicing mindfulness, "a demand is made on us to develop acute, precise mindfulness." Mindfulness is always a pressure, even if a gentle one, on our consciousness, and even this gentle pressure "is still a demand we place on ourselves." Beyond this pressure of mindfulness, there is awareness. Awareness brings "simply appreciation. Nothing is hassling us or demanding anything from us. [...] We could simply tune in to the phenomenal world both inwardly and outwardly." Mindfulness is a pressure that, when well-practiced, dissolves into awareness.

My students saw no path to mindfulness or awareness in my simplistic summary of Western art as conflict. They anticipated advice on tuning in to the phenomenal and discovering the gentle pressures of mindfulness that might release them from their everyday fictions. These students, pens poised, gum chewed, awaited instruction on the practice of form and dharma. Advising them to create fictional conflict did not provide them a practice, but only a cheapened version of craft.

Despite the Greeks' agnostic legacy, these ancient artisans and philosophers did comprehend the seeds of dharma practice. Their term *poiesis*, which translates approximately to "creative making," applied to all activity in daily life. All activities, mental or physical, are poetry. Everyone,

the ancient shipbuilder,  
the modern schoolteacher,  
the urban farmer,  
the caretakers of  
the objects  
and people of the world.

In their awareness,  
all are poets,  
all are poetry.

## 5.2 About the Author

Liberty Kohn is an assistant professor of writing at Winona State University, where he teaches courses on writing, literature, and poetics. His academic articles on literacy have appeared in a variety of journals, including *The Journal of Language and Literature* and *The Journal of Technology and Literacy*. His scholarship on Buddhism in the work of Michael Ondaatje has appeared in *Other Modernities*. He is also a practicing Buddhist and journalist.

## Chapter 6

# A More Poetical Character Than Satan

*Kursat Pekgoz*

The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it.<sup>1</sup>

Of all the gods and demigods of the Greek pantheon, Prometheus was perhaps the only *consistent* and *universal* champion of the human race. The Homeric gods seemed to ascribe little value to human beings: they sent plagues, started wars, and traded cities (that is, the license to destroy them as they please) with little qualm. Even though they selected human champions and mixed with mortal blood from time to time, the human creature was denied any prospect of transcending the inferior status ascribed to it in this valorized hierarchy. We may summarize the capricious, almost misanthropic attitude of Olympus with help from Shakespeare: “*As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods.*”

For mortals, to live was to suffer—of which postlapsarian state Prometheus was the culprit.<sup>2</sup> Afterlife, likewise, was conceived as an eternal gloom for mortals: Homer does not spare even his heroes from the incessant gloom of “the house of Hades.” Hesiod allows a generation of heroes to enter *Νησοι Μακαραν*, a chain of paradise-islands. Yet this myth necessarily posits an impassable barrier between the elect, hyper-aristocratic few and the mortal, plebeian masses. (Works and Days, ll. 156-169b) Therefore, in this world as well as the next, mortals were denied greatness and bliss.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The Marriage of Heaven and Hell William Blake. *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*. Ed. by David V. Erdman. New York: Anchor Books, 1988.

<sup>2</sup>According to Hesiod.

<sup>3</sup>The inexhaustible success of popular spiritual undercurrents, such as Orphism in Greece and the cult of Osiris in Egypt, can be tied to the egalitarian afterlife they promised.

This fatalistic pessimism however, even in the Classical period, was neither uniform nor absolute. Neither was it conducive to the culture of democratic Athens. The myths were in a state of flux, and the playwrights of the nascent democracy were already writing them anew. Aeschylus, therefore, gave his audience a more positive Promethean image than Hesiod's: a culture hero proper, a noble scapegoat who must commit a necessary crime. His lost play, *Prometheus Unbound*, supposedly reconciled Zeus with Prometheus, ushering in a new mythological equilibrium where humans may preserve their civilization without inherent guilt.

What to make of Prometheus, then? That he was a culture hero is a canonical statement. Culture heroes are intrinsically bivalent. As moral agents, they are precarious. They span the distance between heaven and earth. They possess an infernal genius: "full of various wiles" is the very first appellation Hesiod deems fit for Prometheus. (Theogony, ll. 507-543) Hesiod indeed treats him as an ignoble daemon, antithetical to Zeus. Plato has a similar, if somewhat less unfavorable, view. His version of Prometheus, as elaborated upon in "Protagoras," is also an unquestionably demiurgic figure. Man owes his unique status among animals to the gifts of Prometheus.

Myths endeavour not only to interpret (and demystify) phenomena, but also to reveal the *first occurrence* of every cyclic process. According to Eliade, this first occurrence must necessarily belong to a timeless, sacred time. What makes the culture hero unique, therefore, is that s/he performs her/his task within profane, viz. linear time<sup>4</sup> Therefore, all the seminal acts of Prometheus occur within linear time—his rebellion, his imprisonment, his liberation. His torment thus becomes a mirror of postlapsarian suffering. Freud, in his article *The Acquisition and Control of Fire*, approached the myth from a psychoanalytic perspective: the fennel stalk inside which Prometheus hid the stolen fire was, according to him, a phallic symbol. Hence, the punishment of Prometheus was a metaphorical castration.<sup>5</sup> Prometheus therefore was the first criminal, the first victim of the civilization which he himself brought into being.

Even pagan societies treated the culture hero as treacherous figure. Monotheist culture represented an even less favorable view. Just as the postlapsarian world was the domain of evil, so too the culture hero would become Satan himself. This is the nadir of the Promethean image, which Shelley was anxious to revert and invert in his *Prometheus Unbound*. Let us compare Prometheus to Azazel, the arch-demon of Book

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<sup>4</sup>P.G. Volney. "Winnicott's Contributions to Religious Studies: The Resurrection of the Culture Hero". In: *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 51.3 (Sept. 1983), pp. 371-395, p. 384.

<sup>5</sup>The liver was regarded as the seat of all emotion in Antiquity. One might speculate that since Prometheus' transgression is repeated every time humans exercise the faculties of civilization, the culture hero must suffer castration every day.

of Enoch. <sup>6</sup> Azazel, along with his fellow conspirators, is accused of being the *fons et origo* of all human suffering:

And Azâzêl taught mankind to make swords and knives and shields and coats of mail, and taught them to see what was behind them, and their works of art: bracelets and ornaments, and the use of rouge, and the beautifying of the eye-brows, and the dearest and choicest stones and all coloring substances and the metals of the earth. And there was great wickedness and much fornication, and they sinned, and all their ways were corrupt. Amêzârâk taught all the conjurers and root-cutters, Armâros the loosening of conjurations, Baraq'âl the astrologers, Kôkâbêl the signs, and Temêl taught astrology, and Asrâdêl taught the course of the moon. And in the destruction of mankind, they cried aloud, and their voices reached heaven. (Book of Enoch, Section II, Chapter 8)

What is Shelley's Prometheus but a philanthropic, revolutionary, and unapologetic Azazel?

And he tamed fire which, like some beast of prey,  
Most terrible, but lovely, played beneath  
The frown of man; and tortured to his will  
Iron and gold,† the slaves and signs of power,  
And gems and poisons, and all subtle forms  
Hidden beneath the mountains and the waves...  
...He told the hidden power of herbs and springs,  
And Disease drank and slept. Death grew like sleep.  
He taught the implicated orbits woven  
Of the wide-wandering stars; and how the sun  
Changes his lair, and by what secret spell  
The pale moon is transformed...  
(Prometheus Unbound, 2. 4. 66–90)

The passages echo each other. Azazel teaches humankind to forge weapons, to mine ores and make jewellery, the lore of herbs, astrology and the mantic arts, and how to make a lunar calendar. So does Shelley's Prometheus: not only are the same tropes invoked, but even their narrational order has been preserved. Yet whereas the

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<sup>6</sup>Non-canonical Judaic scripture. *Azazel*: a Satanic figure mentioned by name three times in the Old Testament. To him was offered the annual sacrificial scapegoat which has now become a proverbial metaphor.

prophetic voice of Enoch casts aspersions on the legacy of Azazel, whose teachings are condemned as the cause of the genocidal Deluge,<sup>7</sup> Shelley vindicates and celebrates them. What Shelley has done is a mythopoeic Copernican revolution: writing the myth backwards. (Would Shelley prefer *forwards*?)

And Jove now reigned; for on the race of man  
First famine, and then toil, and then disease  
Strife, wounds, and ghastly death unseen before,  
Fell—  
(Prometheus Unbound, Act II, Scene IV)

Shelley represents the original sin of man as *submission* to Jove, who is an incorrigible tyrant and the root of all human suffering. Nor is Jove an enlightened despot: he is an impostor, a charlatan, of “faithless faith.” (3. 3. 130) The *fickleness* of the culture hero has been consigned to Jove himself. His death at the hands of Demogorgon, his own offspring, is ironic and poetic justice. This reversal of roles was, in Milton, a hidden inscription between the lines: an inscription Milton himself was unaware of. Blake deciphered and admired this involuntary inscription, identifying it as what made Milton “a true poet.”

Prometheus, as a rebel against society and God, was *even before Shelley* the quintessential Romantic hero. Such was the Promethean image to the imagination of Byron: the Titan appears as a suffering messiah, stilled and silenced, *all alone* —

A silent suffering, and intense;  
The rock, the vulture, and the chain,  
All that the proud can feel of pain,  
The agony they do not show,  
The suffocating sense of woe

Byron is less interested in the cultural gifts Prometheus imparts and more in his insoluble yet redemptive solitude. He mentions a peculiar Promethean gift, viz. ignorance of the hour of death, referred to also by Aeschylus:

**Prometheus:** I made men cease from contemplating death.

**Chorus:** What medicine didst thou find for that disease?

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<sup>7</sup>The young poet could not have read the ancient text, as the first English translation appeared one year after (in 1821) the publication of his *Prometheus Unbound*. Therefore, we are to seek the source of this amazing parallelism elsewhere, possibly in a similar stock passage from derivative works, but this is beyond the scope of this paper.

**Prometheus:** Blind hopes I gave to live and dwell with them.

**Chorus:** Great service that thou didst for mortal men!

(Prometheus Bound, lines 278–281)

This is yet another trait of the culture hero.<sup>8</sup> The passage reveals the ambivalence still persisting in the Aeschylean narrative, the dual nature of the Promethean gifts, whereas in *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley purges Prometheus of all taint and flaw, even of fallibility. His play has a Manichean ideology colored with unique mythopoeia, which nevertheless defies any monolithic allegorical reading. White specifically refutes the weak allegorical attempts so far made. Shelley's play is replete with symbols, with images of paradisaical beauty, with "veined leaves and amber stems," (3. 3. 141) yet no coherent allegory can be forced upon the text. As much as Shelley was a devotee of Spenser, there is no Spenserian allegory at work. In this regard, Aeschylus and Shelley are kindred spirits. They are both *myth-makers*, not allegorists.

Shelley, four years after Byron, was to complete<sup>9</sup> the redemption of Prometheus. Byron imagined his Prometheus as himself, an aristocratic alien: Shelley likewise, as a revolutionary. The example they both had before them was, naturally, the Miltonic Satan. Shelley expressed this sentiment in his own theoretical writings:

And Milton's poem contains within itself a philosophical refutation of that system of which, by a strange and natural antithesis, it has been a chief popular support. Nothing can exceed the energy and magnificence of the character of Satan as expressed in *Paradise Lost*.<sup>10</sup>

The association between Satan and the culture hero, as with the example of Azazel, predates the Romantics. The culture hero was a demon long before the Satanic school, before Blake and Byron and Shelley. Nor was the redemption of Prometheus an invention of the Romantics. Aeschylus' play already ennoble him as a holy scapegoat, the perpetrator of a *necessary* crime. What is unique to Shelley, therefore, is the coalescence of both tropes: his portrayal of Prometheus a noble and sublime Satan. Shelley, the consummate Romantic poet, hailed Prometheus, the consummate Romantic hero, as a Satan no less defiant, yet more noble, than Milton's. To summarize in his own words:

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<sup>8</sup>Volney, "Winnicott's Contributions to Religious Studies: The Resurrection of the Culture Hero", p. 373.

<sup>9</sup>Goethe wrote a poem, entitled also "Prometheus," which predates Shelley's and Byron's works by a century. Goethe, just like Plato, describes Prometheus as a demiurgic figure: "Here I sit, forming people in my image."

<sup>10</sup>P.B. Shelley. *A Defence of Poetry*. Cambridge University Press, 1840.

The only imaginary being, resembling in any degree Prometheus, is Satan, because, in addition to courage, and majesty, and firm and patient opposition to omnipotent force, he is susceptible of being described as exempt from the taints of ambition, envy, revenge, and a desire for personal aggrandizement, which, in the hero of *Paradise Lost*, interfere with the interest.<sup>11</sup>

Shelley, as he himself elaborates in the Preface, never intended to simply restore the lost play of Aeschylus. He was aware that Aeschylus had exercised a certain degree of poetic license in handling the myth: appropriating and broadening this license, he imagined the lost play into being, in accordance with his own revolutionary views. The Promethean image in his play is no passive vessel of suffering but overthrows Zeus to proclaim the death of all tyranny—even though in both plays, the salvation comes from without (in Aeschylus' lost play, Zeus liberates him, whereas in Shelley's version, the enigmatic and admittedly, the *deus ex machina* figure of Demogorgon does the deed.) The speech of Asia in *Prometheus Unbound* reflects Prometheus' own boastful speech in Aeschylus. There are, in total, twenty-three lines and passages in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* that have their analogues in Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*.<sup>12</sup>

Shelley also invents a new set of dramatic personae, such as Asia and Althea, absent in Aeschylus. The feminine principle, which was so conspicuously absent and silent in Aeschylus,<sup>13</sup> enters *Prometheus Unbound*: Shelley allows an array of unique feminine voices, with their own opaque and enigmatic motives. The most radical departure, however, is the moral force elementally present in Shelley: *Prometheus Unbound* reads as a fable, political yet abstract, whereas *Prometheus Bound* is devoid of any such manifest message. The energy of this message has been imagined as a binary opposition to Shelley's use of mystic symbols, a dualism which is not necessarily helpful in comprehending Shelley's vision.<sup>14</sup> The poets have also chosen different genres, which match their disparate Promethean images. Aeschylus wrote a tragic, and Shelley a lyrical, poem.

We may, therefore, follow the progress of the culture hero through literary history: beginning with the original and ambivalent phase, as with primitive culture hero

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<sup>11</sup>P.B. Shelley. *Prometheus Unbound: A Lyrical Drama in Four Acts*. Cambridge University Press, 1820.

<sup>12</sup>N.I. White. "Shelley's Prometheus Unbound, or Every Man His Own Allegorist". In: *PMLA* 40.1 (Mar. 1925), pp. 172–184, p. 183.

<sup>13</sup>Only the "Chorus of Ocean Nymphs" are female, yet they are too generic and impersonal to qualify as autonomous female voices. Bia, a female personification who appears on the stage, is silent, unlike her male counterpart Kratos, who does speak.

<sup>14</sup>G.M. Matthews. "A Volcano's Voice in Shelley". In: *ELH* 24.3 (Sept. 1957), pp. 191–228, p. 191.

myths,<sup>5</sup> progressing through the infernal, as with Azazel, and culminating with the ennobled, as with the modern Prometheus. What makes Prometheus a unique culture hero is that he was able to transcend his infernal image while absorbing it: he *sublated* his own demonization, to use a Hegelian term. His image underwent three phases: the Hesiodic, viz. the primordial myth, the Aeschylean, viz. the redemption, the ennoblement of the culture hero, and the Shelleyesque, viz. the apotheosis, his Romantic deification complete.

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<sup>5</sup>Campbell elaborates on this theme, identifying the "Thief of Fire" as a subclass of the more generic "Trickster" figure, and also affirms the demonization of the Promethean image in monotheist tradition. G. Messadié. *Seytanin Genel Tarihi (Histoire Générale du Diable)*. Kabalci Yayinevi, 1998, p. 343.

## Chapter 7

# For the First Time in Her Life, She Felt the Fear of God

*Elizabeth Aiossa*

Two possibilities exist: either we are alone in the Universe or we are not. Both are equally terrifying.

—Arthur C. Clarke

One of the great tragedies of mankind is that morality has been hijacked by religion.

—Arthur C. Clarke

At the opening of Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End*, great alien ships set up station over every major city on Planet Earth. These benevolent visitors have only a few demands: end oppression, poverty, and war. Like guardian angels, the Overlords do not interfere with daily human affairs; they do not reveal their biological forms; they do not end religions or governments so long as these institutions are nonviolent and just. Despite the superior intelligence and liberatory practices which bring peace and harmony to humanity, the presence of the Overlords initially incites resistance. In this way, the Overlords are symbolic of modern secular humanism and liberation theologies, and their progressive social ethics. Within a little time, humanity fully accepts the company of these intellectually and technologically *superior* visitors. They abandon their faith in religion, succumb to the boredom of utopia, and eventually give up their progeny to the elusive Overmind.

In *Childhood's End*, Clarke develops a secular fantasy that, at times, appears to be quasi-religious and prophetic. Although it can be argued that all science fiction is prophetic, in some sense, specific religious and ethical filters often color these authors'

visions of the past, present, and near and far futures. This is due to the fact that literary science fiction is speculative social commentary, often concerned with the fate of humanity, the origins of the supernatural, and the consequences of evil in a broad sense. *Childhood's End* suggests that world governments and religions are the root cause for humanity's failure to implement any successful social ethic.

The Overlords are sent to Earth to intervene as humanity's *deus ex machina*, catalyzing a myth of progress. In the end, however, *Childhood's End* mirrors a darker, secular Nietzschean fantasy. Although the novel offers some instruction as to how to transform society through a universal social ethic, the emergent utopia proves itself to be a temporary means to the end of the human race. This essay will trace the symbolism and influence of religion and its God on the novel's premise and plot, and then explore how Clarke converts this religious script into a secular fantasy. This exercise is meant to uncover whether the social ethics Clarke proposes will trigger human progress and evolution, and the limits to and ultimate repercussions for implementing them.

## 7.1 The Overlords as Humanity's Deus ex Machina

It is not easy to see how the more extreme forms of nationalism can long survive when men have seen the Earth in its true perspective as a single small globe against the stars.

—Arthur C. Clarke

The Earth, when the Overlords arrive, looks awfully similar to how it is today. Poverty. Oppression. Conflict. Tensions between nations and cultures, religions and science, riddle global politics and social welfare. Even after the Overlord's "great ships descended in their overwhelming majesty",<sup>1</sup> a few resistance groups fail to accept their seemingly benevolent rule. Nonetheless, thanks to the instruction of Karellen, the Overlords' figurehead, the majority of the human race soon accepts that the Overlords possess superior intelligence, wisdom, and faith in science directed at promoting a new and liberatory secular humanism. Soon it is clear that most "people seem content to let the Overlords run the world as they please".<sup>2</sup> The humans are eager to trust in and allow entities wiser and more powerful than themselves to take control. It is as if they finally realize how insignificant humans are in the face of a Universe inhabited by other powerful and utterly mysterious beings. They quickly accept and submit themselves:

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<sup>1</sup>Arthur C. Clarke. *Childhood's End*. New York: DelRay Books, 1953, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup>Clarke, op. cit., p. 8.

In the first year of their coming, the advent of the Overlords had made less difference to the pattern of human life than might have been expected. Their shadow was everywhere, but it was an unobtrusive shadow... after a little while they were taken as much for granted as the Sun, Moon, or clouds... They realized that those silent ships had brought peace to all the world for the first time in history, and were duly grateful.<sup>3</sup>

Clarke here seems to say that faith in various invisible gods has never been powerful enough to fix humanity's flaws. Therefore, he introduces an omnipotent race to Earth, suggesting that the gods of religion fail due to their lack of physical presence and/or scientific proof of their existence. Essentially, Clarke delivers omniscient secular elites from the stars to save humanity from their self-destruction. These fantastic, fictional beings oversee the reorganization of Earth's institutions and governments to end the petty conflicts between nations and cultures. The Overlords, with the aid of a few prominent humans, begin to construct a world constitution.

The Freedom League is an underground organization made up of devout religious followers who feel threatened by the implications of this god-like alien intervention. Wainright, the spokesperson for the Freedom League, wonders: "I do not know which we resent more—Karellen's omnipotence, or his secrecy".<sup>4</sup> Hundreds of religious leaders, however, "signed a declaration pledging their support for the Supervisor's policy".<sup>5</sup> Ironically, the Freedom League's resistance to the Overlords is due mostly to the fact that they refuse to show themselves. How, the League protests, can we trust a powerful and mysterious entity without meeting him in person? Yet the Overlords have shown themselves—their ships are visible and Karellen's voice is present—which is more than any religion can claim of its own God.

When the resistance groups protest, violently and nonviolently, in an attempt to incite a reaction from Karellen, he refrains from action; "He [Karellen] ignored them contemptuously, leaving them to worry over a vengeance that never came. It was a more effective, and more demoralizing, treatment than any punitive action could have been".<sup>6</sup> Karellen's ability to not retaliate and punish the humans acting against his will exemplifies that he is not human; he is capable of a level of detachment and non-violence that is often attributed to God. Even though the Overlords are aliens, not

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<sup>3</sup>Clarke, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

<sup>4</sup>Clarke, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup>Clarke, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

gods, they represent an omnipotence and omnipresence that is too complex for humans to comprehend; “Karellen’s [the head Overlord—the Supervisor] plans were often too subtle for merely human understanding”.<sup>7</sup>

For the first few years, the human race waits with baited breath to lay eyes upon the physical forms of the Overlords:

But the dream never came true; behind that rectangle of darkness [the screen through which Karellen communicates with the Secretary-General, Stormgren] lay utter mystery. Yet there also lay power and wisdom—and perhaps most of all, an immense and humorous affection for the little creatures crawling on the planet beneath.<sup>8</sup>

Here Stormgren, a secular humanist, admits that he holds the Overlords in a position of high reverence. It seems as though Clarke recognizes in Stormgren that atheists/humanists will give themselves over to the power of a mystery that science cannot readily explain.

## 7.2 The Overlord’s Inspire a Universal Social Ethic

A faith that cannot survive collision with the truth is not worth many regrets.

—Arthur C. Clarke

Stormgren, a character who believes God to be a human invention, still yearns for a supernatural being to have faith in when given the chance. As R. M. Hare argues, “when people have had a good Christian upbringing, as have most of those who now profess not to believe in any sort of religion, it is very hard to discover what they really believe”.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, Stormgren jumps at the opportunity to have faith in a tangible yet superhuman interlocutor. Clarke’s secular vision offers a nonreligious faith that looks similar to what philosopher John Shook calls “Theology Beyond the World.” Beyond the realm of worldly science and naturalism lies a vast and mysterious universe; believers in a *Theology Beyond the World* argue “that supernatural hypotheses are required in order to provide satisfying answers to the ultimate questions about the universe as a whole”.<sup>10</sup> Clarke’s “satisfying answers” marry this type of theology with scientism. He extrapolates from the high probability that other life forms exist in the universe, using mathematical science to project itself beyond the realm of

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<sup>7</sup>Clarke, op. cit., p. 7.

<sup>8</sup>Clarke, op. cit., p. 15.

<sup>9</sup>Mary Midgley. “The Problem of Natural Evil”. In: *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*. Ed. by Charles Taliaferro and Paul J. Griffiths. Malden: Blackwell, 2003, p. 107.

<sup>10</sup>John Shook. *The God Debates: A 21st Century Guide for Atheists and Believers*. Blackwell Publishing, 2010, p. 40.

the known to speculate about the unknown. Therefore, like a *Theology Beyond the World*, Clarke pushes his secular fantasy beyond pseudo-science and naturalism and into pseudo-cosmology.

Nonetheless, the Overlords end up destroying the world's religions and implement secularism; "Of the faiths that had existed before the coming of the Overlords, only a form of purified Buddhism—perhaps the most austere of all religions—still survived".<sup>11</sup> Faced with unquestionable evidence that superhuman beings exist in the universe and are now present on Earth, "all mankind's multitudinous messiahs had lost their divinity. [...] Humanity had lost its ancient gods; now it was old enough to have no need for new ones".<sup>12</sup> Karellen says to Stormgren, "Believe me, it gives us [the Overlords] no pleasure to destroy men's faiths, but *all* the world's religions cannot be right, and they [the Freedom League] know it".<sup>13</sup> The emphasis on "all" reveals that perhaps one of the world's religions can have the truth, can be right.

Humans did not require any new faith or god because the Overlords replace this need and enforce a new and universal social ethic; "the first revelation of the Overlords [was] hatred of cruelty... and their passion for justice and order".<sup>14</sup> This basic social policy extended to other species on Earth as well. Karellen made it clear that "[i]f you slay, except for food or in self-defense, the beasts that share the world with you—then you may be answerable to me".<sup>15</sup> Karellen asserts his power and inspires enough fear in human beings that they surrender to his agency despite his inaction. Karellen admits to Stormgren that "All the political problems... can be solved by the correct application of power"<sup>16</sup> and proves it when he institutes his World State Contract without inciting any more resistance.

Karellen states to Stormgren that he wishes "people would stop thinking of me as a dictator, and remember I'm only a civil servant trying to administer a colonial policy in whose shaping I had no hand".<sup>17</sup> Here, for the first time, Karellen admits that he is doing the work of a more powerful and omniscient force. Therefore, the Overlords are mere agents of the entity at the top of the hierarchy of species. This fact forces humans to reckon with the realization that they are not a precious, "chosen" species, or at least not the *only* one, made in God's image, as Christianity has taught them.

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<sup>11</sup>Clarke, *Childhood's End*, p. 66.

<sup>12</sup>Clarke, op. cit., p. 67.

<sup>13</sup>Clarke, op. cit., p. 16.

<sup>14</sup>Clarke, op. cit., p. 45.

<sup>15</sup>Clarke, op. cit., p. 35.

<sup>16</sup>Clarke, op. cit., p. 62.

<sup>17</sup>Clarke, op. cit., p. 14.

### 7.3 The Overlords are Mere Servants of the Overmind

Now times had changed, and the inherited wisdom of the past had become folly.

—Arthur C. Clarke

When, fifty years after their arrival on Earth, the Overlords first reveal themselves to look like the human image of the Devil, Karellen admits “We have had our failures.” Stormgren thinks to himself:

Yes, Karellen, that was true: and were you the one who failed, before the dawn of human history? It must have been a failure indeed, thought Stormgren, for its echoes to roll down all the ages, to haunt the childhood of every race of man. Even in fifty years, could you overcome the power of all the myths and legends of the world?<sup>18</sup>

By revealing that the Overlords resemble the devils of human myth and religion, he sets up an alternate history which implies that these creatures visited Earth centuries earlier. This is an invention that combines pseudo-history and pseudo-science to explain the unknown origins of the devil’s form. Clarke’s writing often merges science fiction and fantasy with religious elements; he typically filters this mysticism with the “recurring theme of religion—particularly Christianity—as an imperfect embodiment of powerful but misunderstood psychic and spiritual forces”. *Childhood’s End* began as a short story called “Guardian Angels” in which this reversal of Christian belief “or enlargement of the context surrounding it [...] with the Overlords as an ironically benevolent reversal of the human image of Satan”. Clarke flips the script of the Christian devil, making it an alien visitor with benevolent intentions.

But, as Huntington explains, “the Overlords, unlike Satan, for all their frustration with being limited to a technological state, and for all their envy of the mysterious heights of transcendence, ultimately acquiesce to their fate”.<sup>19</sup>

For all their achievements, thought Karellen, for all their mastery of the physical universe, his people were no better than a tribe that had passed its whole existence upon some flat and dusty plain.

And they could only watch and wonder; they could never scale those heights.

Yet, Karellen knew, they would hold fast until the end: they would await without despair whatever destiny was theirs. They would serve the Overmind because they had no choice, but even in that service they would not lose their souls.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Clarke, op. cit., p. 55.

<sup>19</sup>John Huntington. “The Unity of Childhood’s End”. In: *Science Fiction Studies* 1.3 (1974), p. 4.

<sup>20</sup>Clarke, *Childhood’s End*, p. 211.

Despite the Overlords' altruistic mission, their image, in myth and in the diegesis of this story, becomes inextricably and appropriately linked to human death.

As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that the Overlords are *not* Gods, but rather they do the Overmind's work in the universe. That is, it is their duty to usher other beings into "heaven," the Overmind's cosmic consciousness. The Overlords:

function as both a prospect of the possibilities of technology and as figures of tragic limitation, and in doing so they mediate between the two stages of progress. At the beginning of the novel they represent an advanced technology, admirably rational, a model for mankind, a goal for progress. By the end of the novel we discover that they represent the dead end of technological progress, and they become admirable mainly for their refusal to succumb to despair.<sup>21</sup>

The Overlords, like Moses, lead the people to the Promised Land but are not themselves allowed to join the Promised Land. The Overlords, like the Bodhisattvas of Mahayana Buddhism, are enlightened but do not join nirvana. Instead, their mission is to gather and usher others capable of transcending reality and entering nirvana; nonetheless, an *over-being* must accept its own nature and usher humanity into a culturally higher state. The Overlords' have fanatical devotion to the Overmind; despite their inability to become one with their God, they devote their time and spirit to the Overmind's cause.

## 7.4 The Overlords as Nietzsche's *Übermensch*

All human plans [are] subject to ruthless revision by Nature, or Fate, or whatever one preferred to call the powers behind the Universe.

— Arthur C. Clarke

The fantasy of utopia on Earth, when the human race is finally peaceful and protected under the Overlords' guardianship, soon turns dark and foreboding. As Nietzsche predicted, God is dead. In the shadow of God, troops of super-intelligent and technologically advanced elites, *Übermensch*, are required to save civilization. These "overmen" are charged with guiding the evolution of culture and humanity by "any means necessary". In *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Nietzsche develops the concept of the "overman" as one who is willing to risk everything, like the Overlords, for the evolutionary sake of humanity. As Nietzsche would have expected, the human race easily

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<sup>21</sup>Huntington, "The Unity of Childhood's End", p. 3.

surrenders their fate over to these powerful guardians. In doing so, they eventually surrender their very existence. In this sense, the Overlords, like Nietzsche's "overmen," are charged with emancipating humans from the protection of religion, and from the false dichotomy of good and evil, in order to release them from barbarism and into "becoming."

As Anthony M. Ludovici explains in "Notes on *Thus Spake Zarathustra*," Nietzsche conceptualized his:

"Development Hypothesis" as an explanation of the origin of species: but he did not halt where most naturalists have halted. He by no means regarded man as the highest possible being which evolution could arrive at; for though his physical development may have reached its limit, this is not the case with his mental or spiritual attributes. If the process be a fact; if things have BECOME what they are, then, he contends, we may describe no limit to man's aspirations.

The human race in *Childhood's End*, because of the Overlords' directed intervention, succumb to a sort of Nietzschean Eugenics or Social Darwinism. The Overmind invites the final generation of children to join it in salvation; this evolutionary process is called the "Total Breakthrough." This new generation of post-human children is considered a master race fit enough and destined to survive.

Salvation for the post-human children is transcendence through spiritual telepathy. They join an existing cosmic consciousness. The Overmind is a collective omniscience—" [w]e believe—it is only a theory—that the Overmind is trying to grow, to extend its powers and its awareness of the universe. By now it must be the sum of many races, and long ago it left the tyranny of matter behind. It is conscious of intelligence, everywhere".<sup>22</sup> Humanity is willing to be sacrificed in the interest of creating/becoming God, who is envisioned to be the greatest and most-advanced mind; "Potentially infinite, beyond mortality, how long had it been absorbing race after race as it spread across the stars?"<sup>23</sup> According to the last humans on Earth, "this was not tragedy but fulfillment"<sup>24</sup>—"It was all so peaceful. It might have been thus at man's birth as it was at his ending".<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Clarke, *Childhood's End*, p. 177.

<sup>23</sup>Clarke, op. cit., p. 199.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>Clarke, op. cit., p. 207.

Jan, the very last human in existence, observes that “Everything we ever achieved has gone up there into the stars. Perhaps that’s what the old religions were trying to say”.<sup>26</sup>

## 7.5 Fantasizing about Human Failure

This is the first age that’s ever paid much attention to the future, which is a little ironic since we may not have one.

—Arthur C. Clarke

During the Golden Age on Earth, all human conflicts and fears have been resolved thanks to the Overlord involvement. It is clear that the problem of strife and evil in history was caused only by human flaws and error. Theologian Mary Midgley explains, “the problem of evil” is “our problem, not God’s [...we] are capable of wrongdoing,” therefore “we need to understand it”.<sup>27</sup> Clarke’s and Midgley’s progressive ethic argues that evil is the fault of humans. *Childhood’s End* assumes that evil cannot and will not be overcome without help from an advanced elite race. Once Earth’s evils are banished, a new leisure class is born. There is no more manual labor, no murder, no armed forces; in short, there is nothing salacious enough in the news to entertain the masses. Humans are quick to realize, therefore, that even utopia has its own consequences. Boredom strikes, creativity wanes, and the Golden Age of humanity turns out to be its autumn. The most capable people, men and women, found a colony devoted to maintaining enlightenment: New Athens. When the limits of their accomplishments soon show themselves, human impotence is fully revealed.

*Childhood’s End* offers a myth of progress initiated by an alien ethic that leads humanity to transcendence. “Pastoral retreat [the New Athens colony] and individual daring [Jan’s stowaway trip to the Overlords’ home planet] both fail to resolve the dilemma of progress”.<sup>28</sup> Clarke seems to be suggesting that the only true human progress is dependent on higher powers—the Overlord *Ubermench* and the all-knowing Overmind. The lesson for humanity seems to be that its only hope for transcendence, for salvation, is to hold onto reason and science until something beyond these limits reaches out for it.

John Huntington argues that *Childhood’s End* is a “myth of progress” with two stages: “that of rational, technological progress, and that of transcendent evolution”.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>Clarke, op. cit., p. 210.

<sup>27</sup>Midgley, “The Problem of Natural Evil”, p. 361.

<sup>28</sup>Huntington, “The Unity of Childhood’s End”, p. 5.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

This novel is perhaps the only one written by Clarke that suggests technological advancement isn't the best or only means for a better humanity. In other words, "[t]his transcendental vision offers, not the detailed ingenuity of mechanical invention, but powerful hints of modes of understanding and perception and of mental powers and controls that so completely surpass those which we ourselves experience that they are incomprehensible to us" and therefore godlike.<sup>30</sup>

There is also an important difference between normal technological progress and the kind of evolutionary leap that leads to the transcendent vision. Clarke repeatedly describes the elevation from normal human reason and perception (i.e. the technological state) to the transcendent state as generated, not by the powers inherent in man, though without those powers nothing is possible, nor by man's own achievements, but by a genetic transformation in man caused by the interference of *some higher being* [emphasis added].<sup>31</sup>

It is clear that human achievement alone is not capable of leading us to an elevated or heightened state of salvation. This theme suggests that Clarke recognizes that human evolution will reach a dead end if we do not have the privilege of a higher power's interest and intervention.

## 7.6 Arthur C. Clarke's Faith in the Future

I am an optimist. Anyone interested in the future has to be, otherwise he would simply shoot himself.

—Arthur C. Clarke

Is Arthur C. Clarke really an optimist? Is he a secular prophet? As scientifically and intellectually progressive as Clarke's work tends to be, his "secular" science fiction visions of utopia are often steeped in religious mythology and symbolism. So, throughout the years, Clarke has repeatedly commented on the fact that he couldn't endorse any specific religion and its conception of God. He often remarked on the austerity of pure Buddhist practices of meditation towards enlightenment, but he typically referred to himself as an atheist. As Rowe explains, an atheist is someone who will "deny the existence of any sort of divine being or divine reality" and a theist is "someone who

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<sup>30</sup>Huntington, op. cit., p. 1.

<sup>31</sup>Huntington, op. cit., pp. 1-2.

believes in the existence of a [...] supremely good being who created the world”.<sup>32</sup> In an interview with CNN, Clarke said “I do not believe in God, but I do not disbelieve in her either.” Many people “confuse religion with a belief in God,” he explained. It seems clear from *Childhood’s End* that Clarke has trouble believing in much of anything, human or divine.

Clarke, often considered to be among the most widely read opponents of faith, said in an interview that “[r]eligion is the most malevolent of all mind viruses. We should get rid of it as quick as we can.”<sup>33</sup> This investigation began with the assumption that *Childhood’s End* is either an example of religion masquerading as scientific secularism, or of Christian ideas and ideals converted into a secular vision. Since then, the possibility that Clarke is not an atheist or a mere secular humanist emerges through this examination of *Childhood’s End*. The novel is more than mere invention and speculation; it is his *prophesy* — his beliefs surpass *scientism* (the mystical faith in science and its wonders), and *humanism* (faith in humans) and reaches a sort of reverent agnostic faith that a “true” God from the stars will lead the human race to develop a proper theology, abandon religion, and eventually transcend the physical and scientific boundaries of our world. Once we have proof of a higher being from the stars, a new theology can replace the human religions that are so dangerous and misinformed.

Father Lee Lubbers,<sup>34</sup> said of Clarke:

Actually Arthur is very conscious of spiritual values, and I think that he really feels a deep appetite for the kind of spiritual needs that he obviously has. He is, I think, a very deeply spiritual and sensitive human being. While he doesn’t have much use for organized religion, I think that’s a kind of cultural thing and an accidental thing too. If you’re left out of a certain part of society, where you’ve set yourself apart into a different society, it’s very easy to feel left out. I think he does feel left out, and I think he could have, and probably could yet again, very well fit into some kind of a religious cultural context. I think he really feels the need of belonging to a community.<sup>35</sup>

From Clarke’s own words, and Father Lubbers’ estimations, it seems that Clarke may, at most, be religious in Dewey’s sense of the word.

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<sup>32</sup> Clarke, *Childhood’s End*, p. 368.

<sup>33</sup> Matthew Teague. “Childhood’s End”. In: *Popular Science* 265.2 (2004), pp. 62–65.

<sup>34</sup> Who once visited Clarke in Sri Lanka—as quoted in Neil McAleer. *Arthur C. Clarke: The Authorized Biography*. Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1992.

<sup>35</sup> McAleer, op. cit., pp. 311–312.

John Dewey, in *A Common Faith*, considers “religion(s)” to represent the actual teachings and practices of faith-based institutions. The connotation of his usage of “religion” implies practices that are prescriptive and dogmatic and therefore not open to much personalization or interpretation. Clarke would arguably agree. On the other hand, Dewey considers the term “religious” or the religious person from a much less rigid standpoint. Religious persons and experiences are not limited to some relationship with a divine entity. Rather, “religious” can be used to describe a person or experience related to moral, philosophical, natural events, themes, and practices. In other words, “religious” people are contemplative; they examine beauty, wisdom, companionship, love, peace, and so forth. Therefore, the naturalist, the humanist, the activist, the compassionate person (science fiction and fantasy writers are all of these) is, by Dewey’s definition, a religious person.

Religious or not, Clarke misses this powerful opportunity to offer a viable social ethic in *Childhood’s End*. Dewey asserts, throughout *A Common Faith*, that to be religious is to be involved with the benefits of nature and naturalism (as opposed to dependent upon or subject to the supernatural). That is, the true purpose of being religious in Dewey’s sense is to inspire an ethic that culminates in action—that philosophy is only effective when it is shared and practiced socially. Religious people and their institutions must work away from oppressive dogma, dependency on the divine, and the economically and spiritually-driven self, for the benefit and betterment of the community and humankind. Clarke fails to take this next step; therefore, unfortunately, this novel cannot be classified as a liberation theology as may have been contended after a first reading of this novel.

Liberation theologies, like *Childhood’s End*, contend that oppression and poverty, and their subsequent violences, are caused by imperialistic governments and economies, and patriarchal religious traditions. But liberation theologies need to work against these societal failures by equipping individuals and groups to attain independence from these outside systems and institutions. While the Overlords develop “The World Contract” to enforce the rights and liberties of humans, they do so only as a means to a sinister end of the species. Liberation theologies, on the other hand, are charged with enabling followers to be saved from present oppression and suffering in order to provide salvation *in this life*, for the self and the community.

There was nothing left of Earth: They [*the post-human children*] had leeches away the last atoms of its substance. It had nourished them, through the fierce moments of their inconceivable metamorphosis, as the food stored in a grain of wheat feeds the infant plant while it climbs towards the sun.

— Arthur C. Clarke, *Childhood's End*

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## **Part IV**

# **Poetry and Short Stories**

## Chapter 8

# Rocks of Ages, a Poem for T.S. Eliot

*Michael D. Sollars*

I

Old Possum<sup>1</sup>—

I first found you in my early college days,  
A poetry reading in a most curious place,  
Resurrection of gone-by verse in Poets' Corner,  
Where the Abbey's storied plots run thick,  
With mounting monument and towering testament;

After a long absence,  
I have come again to judge—

I listened then, as we all did so long ago,  
To your haunting poems,  
And committed to memory  
Lines from Love Song and Waste Land;

Sequestered like mourners on the bench,  
We gathered in Westminster remembrance hall,  
With air of lilacs and ash and lingering platitudes,  
Amid a thick grove of cemetery memorials,  
Marking poets, novelists, playwrights,  
Composers of the Realm;

The dust of the past still fragrant with ash pollen,

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<sup>1</sup>T. S. Eliot referred to himself as Old Possum

In the long shadow of the Bloody Tower.

Our lit class, disciples twelve,  
Were entombed that fall night;  
Each sat monument high,  
On pedestal or floor, near tomb, bust, or plaque,  
Choosing one or another treasured past;

I first found refuge near the Brownings,  
As their vacancy offered easy repose,  
And eagle quick witness to the centuries  
Spread wide across the hall;  
Shakespeare, of course, has his own quiet isle,  
Although his bones lie in Stratford-upon-Avon;  
Chaucer and Milton rest here in high esteem;  
“Of old the bard who struck the noblest strains”;  
Many more, all written out,  
Exclamations, not whispers at the end,  
Names galore for written glory;

Across the greying slabs and marble marks of majesty,  
The living capriciously caught my eye;  
Raven and red streaked hair and legs bare,  
She sat cross legged,  
Atop Dylan Thomas’ massive edifice,  
In yoga pose,  
Her comfort zone exposed,  
Stirring dull roots,  
Driving blood into the dead  
Mixing memory and desire;

Organ pipe triumph blasts the air

A sign? Perhaps,  
To lead me, I thought,  
To some question;  
What is it?

Another literary sojourner,  
Perhaps promising poet, maybe mourner;

In dark glasses and brown beard,  
Pens in pockets, tablet under arm,  
Hands held firm, like to life raft,  
To his Eliot's book of craft;

## II

Grave friend,  
I have whispered much already;  
Must I now shout?  
Wake, play in your yard of earth,  
Shake about; don't sleep on;  
There's life stirring up here.

I'll reset the stage,  
Describe a scene or two,  
Play a part,  
In the event, where you are,  
No witness to time past comes  
In death's other kingdom;  
Yes, I have borrowed a few of your words,  
One here, two there,  
As you, no doubt, are aware,  
But you encouraged this  
Tradition and talent;

Where are you, ashen face, rest or sleep?

## III

Our class, apostles all,  
Assembled in the hall,  
Poets' Corner, in the South Transept,  
The changing hour, fall of day, climb of night,  
Hour right to reunite at burial site  
And perform the necessary rite;  
A murder of crows shrieks outside,  
Streaking across the fall-filled skies;

Stage illuminated by vaulted rose window,

From where moon beams strew into the cryptic lettered hall,  
Refracted shafts thrusting,  
Breaking through colored mosaic;  
Below lies flower fields of white candle light;

Each writer, the author of his own death

The cast, a pantheon of poets aplenty,  
A who's who of poetic pitch and word wonder;

You've got good company;  
Spenser and Blake,  
Wordsworth and Coleridge,  
The three sisters, Brontës all  
Scott and Pope,  
Byron and Dickens,  
Austen and Scott  
Kipling and Hardy,  
Congreve and Wilde,  
Shelley and Keats,  
Too many to name have gone on;

Stone slabs checker the floor  
With remembrances scratched into each,  
Others, more elaborate, hued stone monuments,  
Memorial busts, hanging stone tablets;  
Groves of mourning,  
These monuments of prosperity have kept  
The stonemason in busy penny bounty;  
Grey, cold, silent, even tasteless,  
A rock quarry, where stone to stone  
About, wary, we walk weary,  
Among the Rocks of Ages;

#### IV

Your name Thomas Stearns Eliot rests  
Alongside Henry James and Alfred Lord Tennyson,  
Far from Old Sonnet Lane and Metered Path;

*Your last thought:  
The communication of the dead  
Is tongued with fire  
Beyond the language of the living*

You have not slept here long,  
Not in relation to the rest;  
Chaucer came first,  
Blind Milton, in 1674,  
Found his way to memorial rest,  
White and grey marble and bust,  
On the wall of the eastern aisle;  
Then death brought Dryden and Pope,  
All afforded a new berth;

Count your blessings, what they are,  
That you are not like some others,  
Whose beds and markers now long lie obscured  
By time and poor human record;

Below those vaulted rose arches  
Ancient angels daily carry antique sooted pots,  
Billowing clouds of smoke and fog,  
Fragrant incantations;  
A once staircase mounted by silent monks  
Enroute from dormitory to night posts and hosts  
Leads now to destinations unknown;

Tea is served while  
Some make etchings across monuments,  
Others discuss current events;

V

Angels of cense; angels of past tense,  
All commence without pretense,  
And dispense their uncommon sense;

Ask Milton if  
Heaven or Hell about;

We go on reading,  
One poem, and the next,  
Your haunting verse;  
We give it the works, our best efforts,  
Taking turns, voices filled with priestly hymns,  
To high modernism;  
Whispers of Immortality comes and goes,  
Then Hysteria and Sweeny among the Nightingales,  
And Burnt Norton,  
And then the chant of  
Hollow Men and Gerontion;

Waste Land, held back, reserved,  
Scheduled for the clock's veritable midnight strike;

Tea is served while  
Some make etchings across monuments,  
Others discuss current events;

Your Prufrock is finally addressed, summoned;  
I move to a fine onyx marble wall, absent of impurities;

A remarkable young lady,  
Not yet fallen into womanhood,  
Covets her turn at recitation;  
Such a rapturous beauty,  
Christabel could be her name;  
She stands quickly,  
Striking figure amid the jagged shadows;  
Simple face of unpainted alabaster,  
Rare blood stones encircle her neck,  
Legs long, a sculptor's marvel,  
Each moulded equally fine,  
Untouched by fault or defect;

She lets her hem of soft cotton white  
Dance down, fall to the knees;  
Below, at her sandled feet,  
Her toe nail art well displayed,  
Spells out, ten gold letters,  
Toe to toe,  
J A PRUFROCK;

In melancholy voice she begins,  
Her breathing, first quiet and uneven,  
Then deepens with impassioned pace,

*Let us go, then you and I*

Staring, I sit transfixed,  
Is she looking at me, in my direction?

She reads on,  
Line after line,

*And indeed there will be time  
To wonder, "Do I dare?" and, "Do I dare?"*

She looms near, within reach,  
But just beyond my touch,  
Where her body trembles;

## VI

Angels appear again,  
With their fiery intoxicants,  
Sight and vision mix in odd alchemy;  
Euphoric madness, rapture, euphoria  
Surge through the hall;

A curious sense clouds the chamber;  
Suddenly a vague form steals outline  
Out of the pregnant fog of incense,

Hysteria finds release,  
Shade and shadow, form and matter;  
Then mere drawing chalk, fine mist in the air;  
Still congealing and emerging,  
It steps out of the void,  
Out of the darkness,  
Out of the nothing that is,  
Into formless form,  
Into human clay;

Someone shouts!

Me?  
You! No, not you, Old Possum;  
You're dead!  
Keep that in mind;

Was that he,  
He that was?

You knew him well enough,  
But let me show him  
Now through new eyes;

## VII

Half hallow, half hollow, his character glides,  
In now dim glow of haloed rose tableau;

Stock and block, all ad hoc,  
Comes he, at nearly  
The upright twelve o'clock;  
Tall with torso elongated,  
Hair spare, combed forward,  
Cadaverous limbs, fed wafer thin,  
Fingers, the weight of charred grey ash,  
Brooding face, distorted features,  
Chiseled and chipped, stone carved,  
Long worked, reworked,  
Considered and reconsidered,

Soul filed and grinded down;  
Finally unlocked from  
The sculptor's cause and curse;  
Giacometti's Man Walking, perhaps,  
Darkened like time burned away by candle light;  
Eyes with confusion's twinkle and blink,  
Mouth slightly agape,  
Shaping words of some consequence,  
Voice spewing from uncertain script;

He speaks to me, or it seems,  
In unclear, mumbled manner;  
I push a response: What is it?

Let us go then, you and I;  
Go? Where?  
My cemetery fear now unearthed;  
I am afraid and yet not;

He continues to speak,  
Still in vague words;  
I press my response: What is it?  
Let us go, he repeats,  
But I hold back;

## VIII

Prufrock, rather, the love song man,  
The down the staircase man;  
The questioning man;  
The there will be time man  
The dare to disturb the universe man  
The coffee spoon man  
The one who only presumes man  
The seen the moment of my greatness flicker man  
The Fool of a man;  
I see a hollow man,  
The dying with a whimper man;

## IX

Her words trail off, reading finished;  
He departs as miraculously as he appeared,  
Drifting back, into shadow woods, dark destiny,  
Into stone, chalk, mist and finally void;

Away from us, Old Possum,  
Opposite the direction of  
The Bloody Tower,  
Where not far  
The Thames surges and washes,  
And shouts from the Tower  
Rain down, hell and hail,  
The feet of Richard, Henry, Thomas, Anne and Sir Walter,  
Each ascends the two hundred steps,  
All for the Kingdom.

## 8.1 About the Author

Michael D. Sollars is an associate professor of English at Texas Southern University, Houston, Texas, where he has taught for the past 10 years. He has published widely, including poetry, short fiction, and critical works such as the *Compendium of Twentieth Century World Novels* and *Dictionary of World Literary Characters*. His research interests fall in the area of Modernism and Existentialism.

## Chapter 9

# The Old English Soul and Body Poems

*Tristanne Connolly*

### 9.1 About the poems

The Old English Soul and Body poems appear in two venerable repositories of some of the earliest recorded verse in the language, the Exeter Book and the Vercelli Book. Among the many other things they contain, from devotional texts to riddles, the most well-known poems are “The Wanderer” and “The Seafarer”. While “The Damned Soul” is found in both books, “The Blessed Soul” only appears (incomplete) in Vercelli, leading scholars to wonder whether it was a later addition by another writer. I include it here out of a simple wish to have salvation as well as damnation; also, it is intriguing to see how superstitions about returning souls (usually considered to be unquiet ones) are dealt with in the blessed case.

The Soul and Body poems are lesser known, not numbered among the greats of Old English literature. In comparison with a poem like “The Seafarer”, beloved of Ezra Pound, they are seen as lacking subtlety. I think this reputation is, somewhat unfairly, because of their direct Christian message, their didactic and devotional purpose, rather unfashionable things since the twentieth century. (Note, too, that because of language changes, Old English was not read much until the nineteenth century with the rise of philology and the accompanying penchant for deciphering dead languages.) In giving attention to these poems, I’d like to give attention to reconsideration of the value of these purposes. Devotion and didacticism do not exclude inquiry and interrogation; quite the opposite, they can encourage the kind of contemplation in which teasing out doubts and problems tests and refines faith. The simplicity of the poems

is charming, and may be deceptive (if you feel the need for complexity). They are first-person expressions of human suffering, dread of abandonment and death, and desire for salvation, just like the elegiac “Wanderer” and “Seafarer”, but with a historically apt injection of *memento mori*. Medieval people could take it; why need we insist on being so much more metaphysical?

I say the poems have a direct Christian message, but they could be considered unorthodox in their denigration of the body, particularly in “The Damned Soul”. The description of decomposition towards the end of “The Damned Soul” is apparently quite unique,<sup>1</sup> and should appeal to horror fans, in the *Beowulf* spirit of ripping the arm and slicing the head off of (sympathetic) monsters. Also, in recording the idea of the weekly return of the soul for three hundred years or until Judgment Day, whichever comes first (which makes one wonder when it was expected), the poems consider the problem of when judgment happens: if at death, what is the need for a final judgment, and what do souls do in the meantime? Here, both damned and blessed souls (their destinations apparently already decided), return and visit their bodies as they await and envision that “great day” when they will have to answer for their lives (despite, or perhaps to confirm, the previous conclusion), and when the pairs will be reunited in their respective eternal abodes through the resurrection of the body.

As well as the tradition of Anglo-Saxon poetry, the Soul and Body poems can be placed in a tradition of such dialogues, going back to fifth century Egypt.<sup>2</sup> But also unique is the absence of any other players in the dialogue: no psychopomps, no angels or devils guiding or dragging the soul to its fate. God is present, of course, but only in naming and description. The isolation of soul and body allows for a focus on their relationship, and this is what I think is most interesting and valuable about these poems. There is an intimacy between the soul and body here, which could be likened to a marriage, complete with the resentment and recrimination which come from being tied to another with a will of his or her own (in “The Damned Soul” at least), and also the pity in discovering the limits of love and attachment in saving another from suffering and decay (in “The Blessed Soul”).

The relationship reminds me of another poem in the Vercelli Book, “The Dream of the Rood”. There, Christ is cast as a Germanic warrior, and the cross (or rood) is his loyal thane who must, paradoxically, serve his lord by *breaking* the code of comitatus: not defending him with his life, but rather allowing him to die. (You can see here how a warrior culture meets the challenge of assimilating the starkly different “turn the other cheek” ethos of Christianity.) There, the cross is an intimate companion of Christ who

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<sup>1</sup>According to Benjamin P. Kurtz; see Douglas Moffat. *The Old English Soul and Body*. D.S. Brewer, 1990, p. 39.

<sup>2</sup>See the section on Sources and Analogues in Moffat, *op. cit.*

suffers while he suffers: Christ climbs on the cross, the cross holds him up; both endure the shame of being crucified like criminals; the nails are driven into both of them.

Above all, the very idea that a soul could address its body after death raises fascinating questions. To what extent are they separate entities (that one can, or even needs to, speak to the other), and to what extent are they tied? The soul does the talking; it makes sense that the body, no longer animated by a soul (and with a tongue eaten by worms), cannot speak. If the poem is an apostrophe, by definition, it addresses an object incapable of answering, like Keats's Grecian urn. Does the soul really have so little power over the body that it (poor soul!), like a long-suffering spouse, must endure the consequences of its partner's actions, with gratitude if good, or if not, with nagging the only recourse? Or is the damned soul something of an unreliable narrator? If it is damned, that might be a clue not to heed everything it says, as with Milton's Satan. (This might lend the poem some complexity, to make it more attractive to modern aesthetic criteria.)

In *Beowulf* and "The Wanderer", the loss of companions, and even the passing away of whole peoples, is figured through the languishing of their treasures. The Wanderer, alone, cries, "Alas, the bright cup! Alas, the mail-shirted warrior!", gone "as if they never were". The Lay of the Last Survivor in *Beowulf* describes how golden objects decay when there are no humans to care for them or use them. In Soul and Body, the body is like such an object, as it decays when not used by the soul. But this does not reduce the body to a mere object, if we remember the animation of the cross in "The Dream of the Rood": it can act as a loyal warrior, and then as an eyewitness to Christ's passion; it decays in the grave, but in the end it is glorified for its service. In Anglo Saxon culture, gold is not only wealth but a sign of bonds between people; the bond between body and soul may, then, be similar to the practical and transcendent bond between those who live together and love and defend each other. The Anglo Saxons are admirable in their fascination with these bonds, and in their intentness on examining how they go wrong, with a poignancy that respects the bleakness of pain and abandonment, alongside a hope for redemption through understanding how human flaws cause tragedy. Now, too, "this may be", as the admonitory voice in "The Damned Soul" says, "a reminder to every man of the wise in spirit".

## 9.2 About the translation

Old English is quite different from the language as we know it now (remember, even Shakespeare wrote in Modern English). It is an inflected language, like German or Latin, meaning that word endings indicate the grammatical function of a word in the sentence. This frees up word order. (The endings have since dropped off, except for

remnants such as “whom”.) In my translation, I have tried to retain the original word order as much as possible, and my other priority has been to find Modern English words related to, or at least echoing in sound or sense, the Old English ones. I haven’t smoothed out all awkwardness. My object is to retain the wonderfully, richly rough flavour of the original, and to give a sense of the way an ancient, limited, practical language can have deep resonance through the work of the words. Old English has a much smaller vocabulary than Modern, but as a result of this—and of the continuing use and belief in runes, a magic alphabet for inscription and divination—words have a stronger spell to connect concepts, with each word having to carry more semantic weight (such as ‘þrym’ suggesting both ‘multitude’ and ‘power’, and ‘ðungen’ both ‘thriving’ and ‘rank’). In revising this translation, I was astounded at the paucity of modern language for such homely ideas as ‘food’, and such transcendent ideas as ‘glory’, in comparison to the nuanced range in this one short selection.

To see—and hear!—what the poem is like in the original, visit the Online Corpus of Old English Poetry and Anglo Saxon Aloud.

- <http://www.oepoetry.ca/>
- <http://acadblogs.wheatoncollege.edu/mdrout/>

For more information about the poems, I recommend Douglas Moffat’s edition, *The Old English Soul and Body* (D. S. Brewer, 1990).

### 9.3 The Damned Soul

Truly it behoves each man  
that he himself look to his soul’s journey,  
how it is grave when death comes  
and sunders the kin, they who earlier were together,  
body and soul. Long it is afterward  
that the ghost receives from God himself  
either pain or glory, even as for it in the world  
that earthen vessel earlier wrought.  
The ghost shall come crying with grief  
always every seven nights; the soul shall find  
the body, which it long wore,  
three hundred winters unless earlier the king of nations,  
almighty God, the end of the world  
will work, the Lord of hosts.

So cries then the care-filled one in a cold voice;  
 the ghost speaks grimly to the dust:  
 "What did you do, dreary one? For what did you vex me,  
 earthen foulness? You waste away all,  
 clay likeness. Little you thought  
 what your soul's journey would later become  
 since it was led from the body.  
 What! Would you blame me, outlaw? What, you, truly the worms'  
     morsel,  
 little thought when you fulfilled the lust  
 for all horrors, how you in the earth shall be  
 food for worms. What, you in the world earlier  
 little thought how this is long hither.  
 And to you by an angel from above, of the heavens,  
 the almighty ruler, of his magnificent power,  
 sent a soul by his own hand,  
 and you he then bought with holy blood,  
 and you with hard hunger bound me  
 and fettered me with hell-pains.  
 I dwelled within you; nor might I go from you,  
 in flesh begripped, and your sin-lusts  
 thronged upon me so that methought full oft  
 that it were thirty thousand winters  
 to your death-day. What, I bided our parting  
 like hard work. Now the end is not too good.  
 You who were rich in food and sated with wine  
 boasted, full of magnificence, and I was thirsted for  
 God's body, ghost's drink.  
 If you then considered, here in life,  
 while I in the world had to dwell in you,  
 that you were by flesh and by sin-lusts  
 strongly stirred and steadied by me  
 and I was the ghost in you sent from God,  
 you never with such hard hell-pains  
 would have confined me by your needs' lust.  
 You shall now nevertheless endure the shame of my confusions  
 on that great day when  
 the only-begotten one gathers all mankind.

You are not now any dearer to any of the living,  
to a man as a mate, nor to mother nor father  
nor any kin, than the swarthy raven,  
since I alone from you journeyed out  
by the hand of himself by whom I earlier was sent.  
They may not now carry you hence, <sup>3</sup> the red treasures,  
nor gold, nor silver, nor any of your goods,  
nor your bride's ring, nor your house-wealth,  
but here shall they abide, bones bereaved,  
torn sinews, and your soul shall,  
in my unwillingness, often seek you,  
to stain you with words, as you wrought for me.  
Are you dumb and deaf, nor are your pleasures anything?  
Shall I still, nightly, of need, seek you,  
made sore by sin, and again soon turn from you  
at cock-crow, when holy men  
to the living God make a hymn,  
to seek the homes that you here assigned me,  
and the honourless dwelling place?  
And many earthworms shall chew you,  
tear your sinews, swarthy things,  
gluttonous and greedy. Nor is your foolishness something  
that you, here on earth, showed to men.  
Therefore it were very much better for you  
than were all earth's successes yours,  
unless you gave them to the Lord himself,  
if you became at the beginning a fowl, or a fish in the sea  
or an ox on the earth that tilled for feed,  
a field-going animal without wisdom  
or on the wasteland of wild beasts  
the grimmeſt, if so God would,  
or if you were the worſt of dragonkind  
it would be better than that you ever on earth became a man  
or ever should have received baptism.

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<sup>3</sup>This could also be read as passive voice: the red treasures etc. may not now be carried hence by you. The ambiguity suits the significance of treasure, buried with the body and analogous to the body. The body cannot keep nor profit by its wealth, cannot save the treasures nor be saved by them. The human bonds the objects represent are also broken and rendered powerless by death.

Then you for us both shall answer  
 on that great day when to men are  
 wounds uncovered, the ones which in the world earlier  
 sinful men formerly wrought.  
 Then will the Lord himself hear the deeds  
 of each man, the shaper of heaven,  
 from each of all men by mouth's speech,  
 wound's requital. But what will you there  
 on doomsday say to the Lord  
 when there is no joint so little, grown on your limb,  
 that you shall not for each one separately  
 yield right, when dreadful is  
 the Lord at doom? But what do we do for ourselves  
 when he has reborn us another time?  
 Shall we then together later share  
 such misery as you earlier assigned us?"  
 Thus it reviles that flesh-hoard. It shall then fare on its way  
 to seek hell-ground, not pleasures of heaven,  
 by deeds disturbed. The dust lies where it was  
 and may not say any answer to it  
 nor there promise any easing  
 to the miserable ghost, aid or peace.  
 The head is burst, hands split,  
 jaws gaped, throat slit,  
 sinews are sucked away, neck chewed.  
 Dreadful worms ravage ribs,  
 drink the corpse in hordes, thirsty for blood.  
 The tongue is tugged apart into ten pieces  
 by the hungry ones as comfort; therefore it cannot readily  
 exchange words with the wretched ghost.  
 Greedy is the name of the worm, whose jaws are  
 sharper than a needle. It ventures forth  
 the earliest of all in the grave.  
 He tugs apart the tongue and bores through the teeth  
 and eats through the eyes from above into the head  
 and makes room for others to the feast,  
 food for worms. Then is that weary  
 body gone cold that he long earlier

clothed with garments, it is then the worms' morsel,  
meat in the earth. That may be as a reminder  
to every man of the wise in spirit.

## 9.4 The Blessed Soul

Then it is more hopefully that the holy soul  
fares to the flesh, wound around with peace.  
It is that errand more blessed than any  
found in the spirit; with joy it seeks  
lustily the clay vessel that it earlier long wore.  
Then the ghosts speak good words,  
wise, victorious and thus truly  
the body they lustily greet:  
“Dearest friend, although greedy worms  
yet greet you, now is your ghost come,  
fairly adorned from my father's kingdom,  
wound around with honour. Oh my Lord,  
there I might have led you with me  
that we could have seen all the angels,  
heavens' glory such as you earlier here assigned me.  
You fasted on earth and filled me  
with God's body, ghost's drink.  
Were you in poverty, you granted me an abundance of wishes.  
Therefore you need not be ashamed, when divided are  
the sinful and the truth-fast  
on that great day, of what you gave me  
you need not rue, here in life  
all so much as you granted me,  
in the gathering place of men and angels.  
Bow yourself down for men and raise me into eternal pleasure.  
Therefore it ever grieves me, dearest of men,  
hard in my mind that I know you in these humiliations,  
food for worms, but that God would,  
that you ever thus chose a loathsome bed.  
I would then say to you that you should sorrow not  
because we will be gathered at God's doom;  
we may then together later share

and we in the heavens be of high rank.  
We need not be chary at the Lord's coming  
nor there of the answer have evil,  
sorrow in the bosom. But we ourselves may  
at the doom there exult in deeds,  
what earnings were ours.  
I know that you were in the kingdom of the world  
ranked magnificently, on this..."

## 9.5 About the Author

Tristanne Connolly is an Associate Professor at St. Jerome's University in Waterloo, Canada. Her research and teaching interests range from medieval writings, Romanticism, and William Blake to religious studies and medical texts. She is the author of *William Blake and the Body*, editor of *Spectacular Death: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Mortality and (Un)representability*, and has co-edited the following books: *Blake, Gender and Culture*; *Blake 2.0: William Blake in Twentieth-Century Art, Music and Culture*; *Queer Blake*; and *Liberating Medicine, 1720-1835*. She has lectured in the US, the UK, and Japan. Her current research focuses on the transformations of gender, sexuality and reproduction across species in the work of Erasmus Darwin (Charles' grandfather), who suggested plants could dream and fall in love.

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## Chapter 10

### The Owl of Minerva

*Farasha Euker*

Oh Sun,  
harbinger of death,  
nuclear warhead in the sky,  
ball of fire,  
Calligula's<sup>1</sup> bitch,  
is there nothing  
you wouldn't do  
to make people worship you?

Oh Moon,  
ball of light,  
or so it seems;  
erotic participant  
in Simo's<sup>2</sup> dreams:  
from sacred darkness  
your essence is shorn  
to partake in the epic war

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<sup>1</sup>Roman emperor known for his cruelty, who both worshipped the Sun, and wished to be worshipped as a sun god.

<sup>2</sup>Abbreviation common in North Africa for Sidi Muhammad. In Moroccan 'Arabic *sidi* is a shortened form of *sayyidi*, meaning "my master". Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, is well known to have had a face that shone like the moon, and he is reported to have split the moon. One of the most important events of the prophet's mission was his visitation of the highest and lowest realms of existence, which is reported to have happened at night during one of his dreams.

against the one named Ahura<sup>3</sup>,  
for what is seen is not  
what is true or what is real,  
and like you we are all light-reflecting faces  
caught in gravity fields.

I, the owl of Minerva<sup>4</sup>,  
live in the realms of the dark night of the soul<sup>5</sup>,  
for darkness is my home  
and through it I must roam.  
Shocking as it may seem,  
realms of light,  
and light beams,  
are not an aid to vision,  
but an object of my derision.  
You say that darkness is bitter  
and light sweet,  
to which I retort:  
Without the bitterness  
life wouldn't be so sweet,  
sweet as halwah,  
sweet as the taste of "The Lilly of Havilah."<sup>6</sup>

Big bang boomerang,  
what goes around comes around,  
and after the expansion  
must come contraction.  
Qabd and bast<sup>7</sup>,

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<sup>3</sup>Ahura Mazda, Zoroastrianism's primary deity. In Persian, the word ahura means light.

<sup>4</sup>Minerva: Roman goddess of wisdom and poetry. The owl of Minerva is a traditional symbol of wisdom. Hegel once famously quipped that "the owl of Minerva only flies at night," meaning that wisdom is most readily available when our minds have been freed from all distractions and impurities, which are in abundant supply during the hours of daylight.

<sup>5</sup>See the writings of Saint John of the Cross and Simone Weil.

<sup>6</sup>See William Blake, Jerusalem plate 19:40-47.

<sup>7</sup>Contraction and expansion. Islamic terms for the *dark night of the soul* and spiritual realization.

qabd and baṣṭ,  
ana al-haqq<sup>8</sup>!  
Or am I?

We think we can see in the brightness of day,  
and our vision will fail when the light goes away.  
That is false,  
it's a lie  
spoken to hide  
the subversive truth that  
it was the prophets,  
not the Devil that had lied.  
But if theirs was a lie,  
it was noble indeed,  
a lie to prevent corruption and greed.  
Then history happened  
with wars and with rape.  
This is the form of our existence  
and our human shape.  
So to reach the Truth in this postmodern spectacle,  
we must become Iblis'<sup>9</sup> receptacle.

A Faustian bargain is life's little cure  
for a sad and meandering existence,  
often a bore,  
for the Devil is good  
and his truths are sublime,  
his way is the left-handed path,  
which is so hard to climb.

So I join the clan of the Devil tonight,  
to seek the One who brought all to life.  
I become the seeker seeking the Sought,  
in this world of violence and strife.

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<sup>8</sup>I am the Truth, i.e. I am God. These famous words, uttered by Mansour al-Hallaj, resulted in his execution.

<sup>9</sup>Arabic term for Satan.

I am the owl of Minerva,  
the apple of your eye,  
and the winged cherubim you'll see when you die.  
I am all of this and much more:  
I am a prophet,  
I am a whore.  
I am everything  
and nothing at all,  
I am the apple,  
I am the fall.

# Chapter 11

## Poems from Poland

*Dena Ratner Marks*

### 11.1 Females in the Sanctuary, 1924

Malka, the Rebbe's girl from the Old New Shul,  
wears a bob haircut  
and stands in the middle of the bima—  
where boys are Bar Mitzvahed  
and men chant Torah bobbing up and down.

On Shabbas, the women pray behind a  
4 foot thick wall,  
through peepholes to the sanctuary.  
But today Rebbe admitted them.

Malka, classmates, and the madricha  
gather as if kindling the Shabbas fires.  
and Malka knows now  
that she will always look like her mother.

Rebbe's daughter, Lead  
the blessing for the candles,  
the madricha commands.  
Her hair is hidden by the simple cap  
of a married woman.

Malka starts the prayer,  
Baruch atah adonai eloha...

and feels her navy-  
blue polka-dot dress sliding  
off her shoulder. If she pulls it

she will stammer. Her  
olive lids cover her mother's dark eyes.  
Her father's image—  
creamy skin, blue eyes, fur hat—guides her hand.

## 11.2 Torah Fantasy, 1924

The madricha pulls a drawing from behind her back  
of a man with shaggy hair  
sitting calm-faced in the belly of a whale,  
surrounded by a cobalt paint sea.

Malka hopes she won't marry a man like Jonah,  
a man, defiant of G-d who  
would not bear bad news—  
the destruction of Nineva—  
to the people of Nineva.

But if she did,  
she would follow him  
to the belly of the whale.  
And there in the pink hues  
of the dark wet cave  
she would only hold his hand.

Unlike her mother who would  
demand in loud shouts  
and repeating words;  
she would only hold his hand,  
waiting for his thoughts to flicker  
and his mind to find the answer.  
Then the belly's mouth would open  
and on the beach

they would nod towards Nineva.

They would tell of mass destruction  
to people who can change to live.

### 11.3 Socialism, 1924

The Tausig Brothers are smoking  
in the horse shed by our door step. One dons black:  
hat, long coat, pants, and shoes.  
His fringes hang down neatly. The other's white collared shirt  
is half way un-  
tucked. His right fringe hides  
its fingers in his pocket. He just finished  
playing football. He wears  
no coat.

They are socialists.  
It is raining. And their smoke,  
caught by the outdoor light, lingers in the wooden rafters,  
misty.

One says in German  
Gleichheit, equality,  
and the smoke slips out of his open lips.

### 11.4 Commerce in Poland, 2005

There are Jews loitering in Poland.  
Seven of them in orthodox costumes:  
black hats, black coats, black shoes. White prayer shawls drape,  
With neat black stripes on the bottoms. They have  
long torsos on stumpy gray pant legs. They have long  
noses and baggy eyes  
That plead. They are dolls and they all look  
the same. They stand behind the amber necklaces  
in Warsaw's tourist market. In their hands,  
unstained wooden flutes and accordions, remnants  
of their pre-painted bodies.

### 11.5 There are Jews in Poland, 2005: A Purim Shpiel

Rabbi Schudrich tells the tale

of Marja and Tomasz who met in school  
and shared skin and head in vows.  
Then Tomasz found his birth-certificate,  
written in Hebrew. Marja contradicts:

There are Jews, today, in Poland?  
Tomasz ambles towards the shul.  
Marja finds hers written in Hebrew too!  
They'll burn their wicks that Friday.  
When they met, they were a skinhead duo.  
Now their daughter makes groggers at school.

There are Jews now in Poland, in Warsaw.  
Kasha folds a paper star,  
makes a hat. She writes Purim in Hebrew  
on it, draws a hanging-Haman.  
She fills it with dry beans and staples it shut.  
She bleeps out Haman's name when she shakes it.

## 11.6 Prayer at Birkenau, 2005

This is Birkenau. The train tracks divide.  
The women's bunkers. The men's bunkers. The chimney.  
The moon's face beams in the sky. March. Poland.  
Cold. With the wind carrying coal-smoky air.  
There is little suffering. Even in such cold.

We walk along the train tracks.  
Ten of us. Walk alone. All bundled  
in black long coats. Jeans hiding long johns.  
Some linger by the monument,

stone misshapen faces, gray  
and broken. The spot of 50th anniversary  
liberation talks. Where Presidents  
left early because of the cold. But  
none of the survivors left early.

This is the spot of mass destruction.

Where everything was possible.  
And the moon beamed down.  
60 years ago. Then. Now. Cold.  
This is the restoration of some morality,

Or, at least I know that this was wrong,  
A wooden cross on a brick church steeple.  
Up high across the street. A second cross,  
Better to view on the ground level,  
Guarded by a chain green fence.

## 11.7 Commentary on *Poems from Poland*

The series *Poems from Poland* is derived from research I gathered while attending a Jewish Studies program in Prague and Poland in the spring of 2005. My thanks go to Natasha Trethewey for her guidance in helping me to produce this series. The poems are divided into two sections, the first of which depicts the everyday life of Jewish people prior to World War II and the second of which is based on my own encounters with lingering antisemitism and Judaism in Poland in the 21st century.

The historical poems explore gender roles, political affiliations, and religious identities of Polish Jews in the 1920s so as to present a banal but unsterotypical portrait of everyday life before the Shoah.<sup>1</sup> These poems are narrated from the point of view of Malka, a fictional character, based on a photograph of a young girl reading prayers, surrounded by her teachers.

For the poem “Females in the Sanctuary, 1924,” I grafted the image of the photograph onto the image of the Altneu Shul (Old New Synagogue) in Prague, where women, to-this-day, sit behind a four-foot-thick wall during services in order to comply with a Jewish custom that prohibits the sexes from praying together. For the poem, I imagined that the women were admitted into the sanctuary, outside of regular services, in order to capture the excitement, pressure, and gender slippage of a young Rabbi’s daughter praying in man’s territory. The final line of the poem is intended to be ambiguous: does the image of her father incite her to cover her shoulder or to follow the lines of the text? Instead of invoking nostalgia or disgust, the ambivalence of the line casts this scene as a complicated but ordinary moment at the intersection of modernity and tradition.

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<sup>1</sup>I prefer “Shoah,” meaning calamity, to “Holocaust,” meaning burnt sacrifice.

“Torah Fantasy, 1924,” weaves theological, sexual, and historical modes of thinking as Malka receives a lesson about Jonah only to daydream about being his companion. The poem represents a version of the poetic project of the series, that is, a subject attempting to construct a new identity by adapting the material of the past. But, the poem, as the title makes plain, is a fantasy: Malka’s naive hope that she would have the power to guide her husband to righteousness through the simple touch of the hand. The unrealistic nature of the poem calls into question the sufficiency of a child’s dreams in producing change at the same time that it submits fantasy as a creative aspect of consciousness. The final lines of the poem contrast the story of Jonah with this private, pedestrian moment and the impending extermination of Jews in Europe.

The next poem, “Socialism, 1924,” combats another form of erasure—the uniform representations we have of Jewish religious figures—by presenting a portrait of two, nonidentical orthodox men. While the traditional garb for one man is predictably in place, the outfit of the other is in disarray because he has been playing soccer, which may seem unexpected since Jews are not often associated with sport. It may also be surprising that the men are socialists, which was indeed common for Jews during this period. The smoke slipping out of one brother’s lips not only contrasts with the stock image of the stoic religious leader but also foreshadows the events-to-come that lurk underneath all of these poems. While during the Shoah individuals were subsumed under their ethno-religious identity, the goal of these historical poems is to reinstate individuality by imagining the particular, possible desires and anxieties of the people that were lost.

Instead of ending the story with the devastation of the 1940s, the poems proceed to investigate the slow revival of the Jewish community in Poland. The contemporary poems in the series portray a Poland in which antisemitism has been altered by market processes and has been met by the growth of the local Jewish community.

“Commerce in Poland, 2005” depicts cartoonish, Jewish dolls that are currently sold in a Polish marketplace much like we might sell figurines of displaced American Indians in the United States. The fixed, simple, homogeneous, Jewish caricature conflicts with the characters in the historical poems who have complex internal and external qualities. Furthermore, the introductory line of the poem, voices the ironic surprise that there are any living Jews left in Poland.

That line is answered by the next poem, “There are Jews in Poland, 2005: A Purim Shpiel,” which is a comic tale about the recovery of the Jewish community in Krakow. This, more hopeful poem, tells the story of two skinheads who married and then later discovered that they were both Jewish. I heard this story from a Rabbi in Poland who led my group on a tour through a Jewish day school, where the students were preparing for Purim. Purim, an antithesis of the Shoah, is a carnival holiday, which celebrates

the heroine Esther, who helped to save the Jewish people from a massacre by the villainous character, Haman. In the poem, the child of the two former neo-Nazis uses a *grogger*, or noisemaker, a traditional tool for blotting Haman's name whenever it is mentioned in the oral reading of Purim. By presenting the poem as a *shpiel*, a playful speech delivered on Purim, I offer, in addition to the *grogger*, a strategy for transforming a crisis through historical remembrance and humor.

Finally, "Prayer at Birkenau, 2005," responds to the purim *shpiel* by representing less cozy aspects of reifying the past through memorialization. The poem registers the speaker's impressions on a walk through Birkenau, a reconstructed concentration camp turned into an unlikely tourist destination. The speaker feels uncertain about how to reconcile the desire to mourn with the consciousness that she is a morbid consumer of powerful experiences. She almost comes to a position of acquiring a moral stance—at least we know that the death camps were wrong—but won't allow herself to fully articulate that idea because it conflicts with her existentialist worldview, signified by the indifferent moon. Instead, grammatically speaking, what the territorial speaker perceives to be "wrong" are the crosses that are placed nearby the camp as if to reclaim the past. Thus, the last poem in the series ends, not with easy resolution, but with a sense of lingering philosophical and religious tensions. Yet, taken as a whole, the series illustrates variegated, even if flawed methods available for analyzing history in order to outlast genocide, fetishization, and internal confusion.

## Chapter 12

### The Painted Lyrics

*Bolla Jyothsnaphanija*

Words reecho their competence in picture making,  
When visual space sine qua non to be filled by captivating language float-  
ing.

Colors, shapes and symbols are crystallized by rhyme, rhythm, meter,  
Silent pictures are voiced in ekphrasis.  
Duality of spaces faced by flow of lingo,  
Moving spaces are caught in concrete narrative tunes.

Coleridge's imaginative poet,  
Present the unrepresentable in the painted lyrics.  
Devouring time can not vanish voicing versions of sculptures,  
They carol re-readings of fading historical souvenir  
When the vision becomes the voice,  
The dancer becomes the danced,  
When source language becomes the targeted language,  
Natural objects unwind in illusory world,  
Like the world woven by Sullivan's numerical figures.  
Poignant endless flow of postmodern philosophies.

Mimetic, poetic, ideals of antiquities,  
Socrates's appeal to Phaedrus  
In Homer's Shield of Achilles,  
In The Rape of Lucrece,  
Pictures are not speechless.

What Pre-Raphaelite poets have revolutionized,

What Theophile Gautier has challenged,  
How Komunyakaa's attempt to let Vietnam Veterans War Memorial to  
speak,  
Pictorial lyrics of Blake,  
The Picture of Little T,  
Are perhaps carved incandescently in literary history.

Words are mirrors for perceives  
No hierarchy,  
No dissimilarity.  
It is Verbal expression to physical immediacy.  
Words to feelings in literature,  
Symbols to feelings in visual culture.

Icarus falling? As Carlos Williams answered,  
Auden defended.  
Speaking pictures of Cervantes  
Have to endorse.

Virtue of chastity of Fairy Queen,  
Portrait of Lisa Gherardini,  
Ode on a Grecian Urn,  
Picasso's intuitive epiphany,  
Wrighting with light in camera lence and perception of sense,  
Painting the lyrics from Dante, Virgil, to Shelley, Byron Browning and  
O'Hara's carved stases,  
It is the ultimate power of language,  
To make us realize the truth of artistic lie.

## 12.1 About the Author

Bolla Jyothsnaphanija is a PhD research scholar in English Literature at the English and Foreign Languages University in Hyderabad in India. She is the author of the article entitled *Resistance from Ruins: An Exploration of Indian Female Gothic Narratives* in the book *Indian Women Novelists: A Critical Spectrum* and the article *Postcolonial Feminist Space: A Shift from Domesticity, Political Unconsciousness Towards Imagination and Radical Change in Subalternspeak: An International*

*Journal of Postcolonial Studies*. She writes poetry and short stories. Her research interests include postcolonial feminism, magic realism, psychoanalysis, and literatures from marginal cultures.

## Chapter 13

# “Funeral Song”, “Dear Daughter”, and “To you Mother”

*Mavis Angeline Madongonda*

### 13.1 Funeral Song

It is not the hushed weeping  
Nor the piercing wild screams  
Nor the beating of chests  
Nor the swollen downcast eyes  
Of the mourning youthful widow  
That herald the gruesome passing  
Of an equally youthful husband  
Whose mangled remains  
Lie boxed in the confines  
Of the cheap white coffin  
Concealed from the sight  
Of the feeble and faint hearted.

It is the blending  
Of the sharp stabbing soprano  
And the weeping passionate alto,  
The reverberating husky bass  
Of big breasted Mbuya Chitunhu.<sup>1</sup>  
Amidst the dusty, choking air

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<sup>1</sup>Old granny Chitunhu

It is the rhythmic threshing of feet  
The sobbing pounding drum,  
Gyrating waists and chests

For it is a party  
For the young and uninitiated  
But listen...  
and watch closely  
To the heart of the message  
Of the shoulder readily offered  
For at least two nights in a row  
The warmth of the drooling saliva  
From the semi-orphaned sleeping infant,  
Plastered onto the back  
Belonging not to its mother  
It is the unisoned tormented crescendo  
Of the tortured agony of pained voices  
The solidarity that underlines the pain  
In the rhythmic funeral song  
Of poor rural women.

## 13.2 Dear Daughter

I have long awaited your coming  
I yearn your dearest companionship  
The ultimate want of every aged mother  
During the times of fast sagging flesh  
of fast flagging health  
of fast ebbing strength  
and loss of equally aged teeth  
I long for your presence  
Amongst your born boy siblings  
A flower amongst growing thorns

But...  
You see daughter,  
I have other thoughts  
Hiccups

amidst fast flowing speech...

For I cherish your not being here  
I despise your presence here  
A bitter-sweet abhorrence  
known only  
to a mother's protective love

Remain safe my daughter  
in  
your not being grown  
into the mother being  
from your rudimentary womanhood

I value your cocooned haven  
in the depth of the darkest nest  
enshrined in the deep  
blackness of bowels  
of every woman that walks the streets

I stand accused of defying  
the laws of nature  
I am madness incarnate  
for my dormant denial  
of your born existence

But...  
You see daughter  
They give us no choice  
But to run  
Or stay enclosed  
Or trapped in these  
Bodies

### 13.3 To you Mother

I see the long stretched tendons,  
the permanent taut ligaments  
the stiff hardened sinews

of your long silent suffering  
ash-whitening hair,  
sun-baked wrinkled skin  
chipped, cracked fingernails.  
Who will ever appreciate  
the callused hardened palms?  
Who will say thank you?

## Chapter 14

# The Olive Tree That Brought Salvation to an Old Man

*Translated by Farasha Euker*

from *Night in Vidovo polje (Vidovopoljska noć)*<sup>1</sup>

In 1936, the prostrate old man Mato from Plužine  
had a tattered shirt of many colors on his aged body  
and an even hundred years that summer.

In his courtyard, grew a tree bearing olives with a sheen like silk  
and so it grew two years prior to his first breath.  
One day—a Monday—the tattered shirt became a rope  
fashioned to extinguish the long-burning flame of old man Mato,  
who swung back and forth until he died, he died, he died,  
and the old olive branches swayed to and fro,  
as if checking to see  
if Spring gave birth to leaves of grass from May's red soil.

### 14.1 Maslina je dala utočište starom čovjeku

Sklopčani starac Mato iz Plužina imao je 1936.  
jednu poderanu šarenu košulju na staračkom tijelu  
i ravnih štčinu godina tamo negdje u ljeto.

U avliji njegove kuće rasla je svilena maslina

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<sup>1</sup>One of the principle štećak fields in Bosnia and Herzegovina, located approximately three kilometers from the town of Stolac.

i imala kad se starac rodio nešto oko dvije godine.  
Jednog dana (bio je ponedjeljak) od razdrte košulje konopac  
napravio je da ugasi svoj dugi život taj Mato starac,  
koji je tako kao u njihalci jednoj umro, umro, umro,  
a stare maslinove grane malo se zanjihale,  
kao da su gledale  
je li proljeće izniklo vlati trave iz majske crvenice.

## 14.2 Stone Keeper, a Commentary by Farasha Euker

I should like to begin by laying special emphasis on what may appear at first glance almost a truism, the importance of not placing any reliance at all on the indirect evidence furnished by translated texts.<sup>2</sup>

Translation is not only problematic from one language to another, but even within a language. Individuals and societies are born under very specific circumstances and are raised and nurtured within specific cultural, economic, and social structures. For most Bosnians living today there exist only two eras, not BC and AD, but before the war and after the war. With this reality *on the ground* and the cultural heritage of the country being called into doubt,<sup>3</sup> the importance of *translating* Bosnian culture for younger generations is more important than ever. The theoretical basis of such an undertaking can be found in the writings of Mak Dizdar, particularly his *Kameni Spavač (Stone Sleeper)*, which exhumes Bogomil culture from its historical grave. With the recent closing of the Historical Museum and the fate of the National Library and National Theater uncertain, a theoretical undertaking of this kind gathers all the more urgency. Dizdar metaphorically digs the graves of persecuted adherents of the Bogomil faith, presenting lived history through their eyes. This *phenomenology in verse* went beyond just the Bogomil faith, explaining, through poetry, the essence of Bosnian culture and identity, both that from abroad, such as Islam, and that which seems to spring up naturally from the land. During a conversation with an imam of a mosque in Sarajevo, he stated that “any Muslim who claims that cigarettes are not allowed according to Islamic law is not a true believer, because it is cigarettes that got

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<sup>2</sup>Toshihiko Izutsu. *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an*. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup>Sabina Nikšić. “Bosnia's Top Culture Institutions Closing Down Amid Funding Issues”. In: *Huffington Post* (2012). URL: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/01/05/bosnias-top-culture-institutions-closing\\_n\\_1186999.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/01/05/bosnias-top-culture-institutions-closing_n_1186999.html).

Bosnia and the Bosnians through the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian occupation and through the most recent war.” I think it is not cigarettes, but a uniquely strong cultural heritage that gave Bosnians the strength to withstand uniquely difficult times.

Snowflakes are falling ever thicker and blacker like sins  
In a life that’s nearing its end

So will we still have eyes  
When the apple tree in the garden puts forth its first white blossom?<sup>4</sup>

The strength of Bosnia lies in its past, but not a petrified, ossified past, but a living tradition that can lead to the future. The Bogomils, Abdullah Bosnawi,<sup>5</sup> Meša Selimović, and Mak Dizdar are only a handful of the luminaries from Bosnia’s splendid past. I certainly understand the impulse to build more and more shopping centers, but what is the cost? It seems as if a new and shiny edifice is being built at the expense of the heart. The heart of a nation is its poetry, and the pure, distilled essence of Bosnian poetry is to be found in the work of Mak Dizdar, but whereas *Stone Sleeper* contains the secret of Bosnia, *Modra rijeka*<sup>6</sup> contains humanity’s secret. As a foreign visitor to Bosnia, I was awed by many wondrous sites, smells, sounds, and tastes, the most marvelous of which was a February night’s snowfall joined by the distant and not too distant sounds of church bells and the adhan.<sup>7</sup> Dizdar was the key that unlocked these experiences. I can only hope that Dizdar, that archaeologist of the Bosnian imagination, can act as the key-maker for the current and countless future generations of Bosnian youth.

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<sup>4</sup>Mak Dizdar. *Stone Sleeper*. Trans. by Francis R. Jones. DID, 1999, p. 169.

<sup>5</sup>One of the greatest commentators on the writings of Ibn ‘Arabi. For more information see: Rešid Hafizović. “A Bosnian Commentor on the Fusus al-hikam”. In: *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society* 47 (2010), pp. 87–107.

<sup>6</sup>Mak Dizdar. *Dark Blue River*. Web. July 2007.

<sup>7</sup>The Muslim call to prayer.

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## Chapter 15

### “Nocturne” and “Aubade”

*Morteza Dehghani*

#### 15.1 Nocturne

After such a meandering history  
Of rambling  
Along water and up the steps  
And steps and down the trees  
And trees and across the water  
And round and round the waterfall and fountain  
And kaleidoscopic review of image after image  
Apparitions among these realities  
—such a tormenting harmony—  
It is time I put an end  
To this untrue reality  
This unreal truth  
This blurry illusion  
    And phantasmagoric mirage.  
After ages of abrasive excursions  
Of unreal life and true death  
On a desolate seat I collapse  
In a solitary season with no apples  
This is the only one of its kind I should think.

Under thick layers of clouds  
Tonight is the incantation of the moon.  
Here is when the time stops

To give me a lesson  
That heaven cannot shed showers of light  
When tortured  
Under piles of thickening clouds  
Gray clouds  
Barren clouds  
Spellbound clouds  
And I was pondering  
What if the light wraps us deep in dark?

Can it be a green journey I wonder  
The leaves will once blossom  
On top of these barren trees,  
I muttered this to the solid ears of the evening  
Progressing in a galloping rhythm  
But darker still is our conscience.  
The sprouts will nourish  
These naked trunks of the afflicting winter  
The fruit of an ecstatic rapture.  
Can it be the first birth of winter?

And  
“If spring comes, can winter be far behind?”  
This is indeed  
The reminiscence of April’s sensual breeze.

Under the spell of an exceptionally amiable night  
The familiar wooden bodies  
The familiar passages of unfamiliarity,  
And amber halos of white slim metal bodies  
Galore in friendly lines of unfriendliness  
My shadow rises to salute me  
That poor fellow thinks I am the shadow  
He stoops  
To breathe a little life,  
Oh, that haughty distortion of an obsession with light and dark  
Marches and sinks deep  
Into existence.  
And this is the second birth of the season.  
The harmony

Creates my shadow  
And I am born.  
Listen!  
Deadening Marches still echo among these trees  
But I shall dance not to the music  
Of my enchanted memories  
Only my shadow.  
In an age  
When miracles are taken for coincidences  
And coincidences for miracles  
I do believe in neither  
And this is the story of all my peers  
Of all the shadows.

After such a meandering history  
Of trudging  
    With kaleidoscopic review of image after image  
Round and round the waterfall and fountain  
Across the water and up the trees  
And trees and down the steps  
And steps and along the water  
I find it hard  
To put an end  
To this dazzling illusion.  
And this slumbering shadow is left  
Victim of a ruthless mockery.  
Let me cherish the moments of this historical return.

And once again  
This incarcerated  
Gigantic shadow  
Is pinned to the trunks  
With a handful of dusty questions.

## 15.2 Aubade

It was only last night  
Only last night

He kindly told me not to be so inquisitive  
It was only last night I woke her up  
And told her I felt done for  
And the night before that the split happened in the apple  
That killing venom  
A snake right here,  
And everything started from there.

I did not know smokes of desperation,  
And nocturnal jaunts at chilly foggy nights  
Could fruit so lavishly  
I wish I had “spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways”  
Oh, Tom! how very well put.  
But (how) should I be in?

And “Time” and “Toil”. What curious concepts. That’s when I yawn,  
And feel like dying an eternal sleep. And that’s THE blessing  
Wrapped in oblivious memories.  
Yes, yes, let us go to Lethe.

Morrie, wake up, it’s just a dream  
Morrie, wake up, it’s a dream  
Ah, indeed a dream  
A phantasmagoria three decades passed.  
Calm calm, my postcocious child, to awakening we drive  
But, do I care to spit out Albert and Jean Paul?  
And care to end and begin  
Or begin and end?

No matter what, or when  
The “Ball” is rolling down, is rolling down...  
How far have I gone, how far must I go?  
Pushing it up again in the cherished moments  
Of life in death and death in life  
I am bored to annihilation. That is not very difficult to see, you see!  
My pointing finger and lower lip, agape  
A bump into eternity.

That’s all a bathos,

—Hallelujah, Hallelujah  
That is all bathos  
—Hallelujah, Hallelujah  
A Beckettesque opera.  
Oh, no. I am exhausted,  
Let me be honest, once in your life  
I cannot play that young mystic in love.  
Besides,  
With such a libretto,  
Not me.  
I won't waste my cords thus.  
I far rather be a leprechaun  
Than play fake roles  
Am I a visionary, do you think?

I can smell  
The burgeoning spite  
The deadening spite, the scorching spite  
She has come for what, I wonder  
Oh that apocalyptic long-awaited implosion  
Fire, fire, and  
A cold winter dawn.

—“Brother, dear, I wept, why”  
—“I couldn't stand it, no, no, I couldn't”  
—“You shouldn't have done that”  
—“I find death in living

And living in death”  
—“Ok, then. Do As You Like It.”

And that's all the ills of a phantasmagoric mind I should think.

My Sister was still singing life  
My Mother and  
My Brother  
Were drowned in forgetful waters.  
All my Mothers.  
And I drowned in tears

That was all the dream of the dawn  
A dream of a dawn.  
Oh, the rays of the dawn  
Pierce soft the stooping horizon  
In moments of indefinable colors.  
Listen!  
Hissing sound of rain out of the window  
Ela, Ela, Ela,  
Hitting flirting strokes of rain on the windowpanes  
“Peace, salam, shalom”  
“peace, salam, shalom”  
Tears,  
Tears,  
Tears.

### 15.3 About the Author

Morteza has an MA in literature from Iran’s Shahid Beheshti University where he worked on the poetry and spiritual vision of Gerard Manley Hopkins and is currently a PhD student at the University of Waterloo. He writes poetry, fiction and non-fiction in English and Persian. His interests include literature and the Sacred, and the intersections between literature and philosophy.

# Chapter 16

## Four Prose Poems

*Don Adams*

### 16.1 A Dying Friend Once Said To Me

“I am contemplating immortality,” meaning mortality I thought, the being that will not be, but maybe I was wrong. And once in the middle of an argument I was told, “What I say is what I mean,” which wasn’t what it meant to me. How can we hope to understand or explain, caught in that trap? Could it be that, among all other things, it is always love that we mean when we say to each other what is otherwise meaningless?

Then began a fight for, you know what, rights I mean. What’s up with that? “As though it would do anybody any good,” he said, meaning his marvelous collection of records and eight-track tapes and cassettes and reel-to-reels and CDs etcetera being moved to other than the other room, where they in fact still stood in their fastidious wooden cases. He was perhaps, or almost certainly that is, delusional and was “contemplating immortality,” he said, meaning mortality I guessed, being and not, that is not is, although it would most certainly seem to be it. Same difference then? “What I say,” says he, being now an other, “is what I mean,” which is exactly what it would not do for me, except under some sort of enormous kind of constraint, restraint probably I mean how can one possibly hope to explain, caught in that gorgeous, as they say, trap? So that, is it only love that we mean when we say to each other what we don’t know ever?

### 16.2 I Like That

By the end of his long, exhausting narrative, Gibbon is utterly disgusted with the “Romans,” as they insisted upon calling themselves, although they spoke Greek, not Latin,

and resided in Constantinople, their vast empire having shrunk gradually, inexorably, to the confines of that legendary city's famously impregnable defensive borders. Still nothing was what it once was. Who among their glorious ancestors would have predicted that this home of the "one true Faith" (and not that "perversion of the Latins" intoned in the Vatican) would become infamous as "the place of infidels," a thorn in the side of the Ottoman Empire, which really was one, and an affront to the "one true God" and to his prophet? Even with the enemy at the gates, the Greeks, as Gibbon refers to them, continued to posture and prevaricate. The Emperor and his counselors attended a mass in St. Sophia's preached by the Pope's lieutenant at which they promised an end of schism in return for military assistance. But the Western powers weren't interested in their offers. They had heard it all before and all too often. The Greeks were good with words, but the word of the Greeks was not good. It was axiomatic. The superstitious Byzantine populace nevertheless avoided St. Sophia's after that. One could not put distance enough between heresy and oneself. Until, that is, the frenzied Turks actually breached the proud city's legendary walls and the age-old prophecy was recalled, which foretold that at the very door of the most famous church in Christendom, the Romans would be miraculously delivered by the avenging sword of God's descending servant. Inside the sanctuary, a desperate vigil was rewarded by the unmistakable sound of metal rapping at the massive wooden doors and then repeated, furious blows by a battle-axe hacking the great door to splinters. It was then that the miracle occurred, as the last of the Romans, those not fit to give their lives on the battlements, the old and the sick, women and children (whom a kind and wise man once had gathered gently to him), from sin and error at last were delivered according to God's unerring word.

### 16.3 Growing Older

I am reminded of an elderly musician's exasperated admonition to his aging apprentice, "You are very gifted, but you do everything wrong." If, near forty, the point is well taken, it is no less apposite to the greater population of a planet at risk from its gifted inhabitants. God is what is, as Spinoza almost says. Growing older, however, one is tempted to desire a deity like oneself, but infinitely greater, with emotions and a will and a decided inclination for doing everything wrong, then making it right, on occasion, later, so that there might be someone somewhere to have mercy on us all.

## 16.4 A Wise Man Once Said

“It is important to know yourself as well as you can so as not to add unwittingly to the collective misery of man.” I must admit then that I have been a dodgy geezer in my time, as well as a shameless tourist.

I stood in a corner spot once and sang a song I just made up. A few of the more credulous among those present stopped to listen and gaped in awe.

I would like to say that I have never thrown up in a cab, or maybe just once. *Well I'll be damned.* It's not all good. Experience has its casualties and sometimes they are us.

I once dreamed that I said to the President of Russia, “Listen, Boris, it would be easier if we were honest, the hardest thing to be.” Confucius is reported as having said that the honest archer does not blame the target he has missed.

In a smoky pub late one evening, I heard a drunken rendition of “Old Man River” that was truly gruesome and similar manglings of more recent pop hits. What makes people do it? Stand up, I mean, and declare themselves shameless beyond any reasonable doubt. I have been so on occasion, or so I have been told, myself.

Bruckner repeats himself more than your average great composer. Stravinsky once said to a nodding listener, “It is all right to fall asleep in Bruckner because when you wake up you're in heaven.” Or was it Schubert he was talking about? They are both compulsively repetitive and occasionally gorgeous beyond words.

Guštav Mahler is the only composer at which the docile greyhound Karla has ever howled and that just once, at the funeral march in the Fifth Symphony. It was Theodor Adorno I believe who pronounced in a fit of characteristic pique that Mahler is a travesty of Bruckner, who is the real thing.

I have noticed that my own behavior repeats itself in similar fashion, so that the second lover say in a series will tend to serve as a travesty commentary on the one who came before. Is there no such thing as original experience, untainted by the mistakes and triumphs of the past?

As the enormous nineteenth century began to swing shut, a languorous Oscar Wilde remarked that art, unlike life, does not pointlessly repeat. At or about the same point in time, a soon-to-be-insane Friedrich Nietzsche, “most quiet and shiest of men,” imagined existence eternally recurring, world without end, while in Vienna an ego-driven mother's son began to notice tics in his upper-middle-class female patients and sought to devise a remedy or cure through painstaking analysis.

Compelled by the motion inherent in all matter, an ancient Greek philosopher once famously noted that a man cannot step into the same stream twice. Worlds away,

a jaded lyric poet grew weary of watching the repetition of days and nights in the desert and complained that there was nothing new under the face of the malevolent sun.

The spiral form has been thought by some to signify eternity, repetition and progress linked. Blake envisioned grains of sand sinking through an hourglass, Yeats trod up and down the stone staircase of his poetic tower, while Merrill stared in wide-eyed wonder at a three-dimensional display model of human DNA.

Repetition is saying that I am I am I, *etcetera etcetera etcetera*. Someone once wrote, "I am I because my little dog knows me," which is to say of course that we must go to the dogs once and repeatedly in order to know ourselves to any remarkable degree.

"When I first saw you," a friend once said to me, "I thought you looked aloof." "That is how I look," I said, "when I do not look otherwise but it doesn't mean I am." Another friend once wrote to me in a letter, "When we first met, I thought you were truly and remarkably happy. You probably weren't, even then, but so it seemed."

But listen to this. I know a man who has endured repeated errors because of his stubborn will to believe that people are as they seem. He once said, "Any version of the self is an honest offering to the world of appearances in which we live, in praise or thanks for everything that is."

I give you then, ladies and gentlemen, the multiple self in its multiple world, speaking of which there is no end of elaboration, variation, repetition, and somewhere amidst the whole kit and caboodle, one insistent theme of wonder that one is.

## 16.5 About the Author

Don Adams is an Associate Professor of English at Florida Atlantic University. Author of *Alternative Paradigms of Literary Realism* and *James Merrill's Poetic Quest*, his work has appeared in *Genre*, *The Gay & Lesbian Review*, *The Rumpus*, *Journal of Postcolonial Cultures and Societies*, and *Pleiades*.

## Chapter 17

### Calla

*Kursat Pekgoz*

Calla, scarlet Calla—  
Time, fickle god, was to you too kind  
For an age, too unkind for an hour.  
Earth itself vomits up the blood  
Which your children shed and drank.  
Your full moats encircle streets desolate,  
And buzzards gather to pick eyeballs.  
Your towers of legend, of red bricks,  
Are aflame with sulphur subterranean.  
Your walls crack, battlements crumble,  
And shatter they, the colossal idols of thine.  
Barren are the great ziggurats of old  
And unmanned, your infernal furnaces.  
Where, your pride and pomp and pageant?  
Where, those murderous hosts of yours?  
Where, your swift chariots of cold iron  
Which reek of blood, even between wars?  
Too proud you were upon the meek:  
May the meek bequeath fresh earth  
As worms gnaw your dead children.  
Weep, mother of swords and monsters:  
Weep, as you rot.

Calla, quaking Calla—  
Mene! Your days are counted.  
Tekel! We weigh and find you wanting.

Upharsin! You are halved and quartered.  
Already you are become a city of tombs.  
The soul of the world wants peace endless:  
Peace which shall never sleep, never blink.  
No hymns you shall hear, only dirges  
Of iron swords, of garments black,  
Of widowed grief, of orphaned tears.  
The anthem of your soldiers  
Will be your requiem.

Calla, fallen Calla—  
Who shall atone thee, city overthrown?  
Can you unshed blood so profuse,  
Or repair a world torn into pieces?  
No lamb can cleanse so much scarlet.  
You would have been a nation of nations,  
The mother-queen of all things mortal:  
A greater and better Jerusalem.

We gave thee a throne of living emerald  
Which you despised, taking instead  
A throne carven out of solid blood.  
Behold the ruin, mother of Nimrod!  
Behold red iron and green copper,  
Behold swords decay, sickles moulder.  
Naked you lie, as both corpse and tomb.  
Now makes haste the glutton dragon  
Who shall devour thee: Babylon.  
Tremble, tremble like the meek  
Whom you were wont to conquer.  
Empires shall eat up empires.  
And the dragon shall feed  
Upon the asp: Calla.

# Chapter 18

## A Set of Four Poems

*Morteza Dehghani*

### 18.1 The Seagull

The migratory seagull  
Gliding up there  
Proudly or not!  
Soaring high dropping low  
Against a ground  
Gray and Grullo  
Just in a quick shot  
Reminisces,  
The sky is not nearby  
Nor the sea nigh,  
Which says a lot  
About the reality  
I have to live by.  
And one last point:  
That you don't fly  
The animal that you are not.

### 18.2 The Fly

The dead fly  
on the windowpane,  
takes my squinting gaze

to the huge icebergs  
floating up there,  
about to crash  
into each other.  
The white fluffy lava,  
against the unending blue,  
ebbs and flows fast,  
not unlike a fountain;  
harbinger of life.  
Death with or without rue,  
does change the world!  
Not a trifle!

### 18.3 A Glitch

A weekend  
morning of late March;  
Images colourful and vivid  
march mightily,  
overwhelming and fluid  
before the eyes, down there,  
somewhere behind  
the roots of the retina.  
Images of a month of memories that find  
their ways, as always, at months' end at blind  
alleys of monotony,  
ruthlessly pounding the mind,  
Without a modicum of mercy.  
Images of home, perhaps!  
And the weekends,  
The quiet of Adineh<sup>1</sup> streets  
and lapse  
into moments of appetizing pies of pied poesy,  
that I used to take as purifying pre-breakfast;  
the best

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<sup>1</sup>Adineh: Persian word for Friday.

of Soh'rab <sup>2</sup> or Elizabeth,<sup>3</sup>  
the freshest,  
of Forough <sup>4</sup> or Wallace <sup>5</sup>,  
whatever my hands could reach  
at the top of the chest  
of drawers.  
The sight of the church next door  
And the reverberating speech of passersby, each  
fixes up that mental glitch.  
A moment of delay  
And...  
"This is not home",  
Nor is it Friday.

## 18.4 A Tree

Dancing widely, swaying to and fro  
to the haunting howl of the thunderous gale  
slashing the grass  
over the humpy hill  
and lashing the greens of the Daisies dale,  
the colossal tree could intuit well  
to stand that ruthless, unruly assail  
he could do perhaps nothing but to fail  
to resist, thinking better give by and by away  
its leaves and branches and the frail  
twigs to the whimpering whim of the winding wind  
and not timidly moan or bewail  
the loss of the green and the death umpteen,  
seeing to bloom and blossom and soon prevail  
he has to find an unshakable place to nail

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<sup>2</sup>Sohrab (Sohrab Sepehri) is a modern Iranian poet.

<sup>3</sup>Elizabeth of the poem is American poet Elizabeth Bishop.

<sup>4</sup>Forough (Forough Farrokhzad), modern Iranian poet.

<sup>5</sup>Wallace is Wallace Stevens, modern American poet.

its roots deeper in its source,  
Mother Earth.  
With that in mind and having weathered the storm  
and whispering his tale  
to the hearing ears  
of his small and short-lived neighbour snail,  
the naked tree  
was now content, thinking  
had he even had derailed  
into the bosom of the earth dead  
he would have been pleased and more than that  
as a tiny part of the cycle of life.  
And felt ever more content to hail  
“To It he belongs and to It he returns.”

## 18.5 About the Author

Morteza has an MA in literature from Iran’s Shahid Behehsti University where he worked on the poetry and spiritual vision of Gerard Manley Hopkins and is currently a PhD student at the University of Waterloo. He writes poetry, fiction and non-fiction in English and Persian. His interests include literature and the Sacred, and the intersections between literature and philosophy.

# Chapter 19

## Verses on Love

*Farasha Euker*

### 19.1 The Search

Just past midnight, in a land of many tears,  
I look to the sky, reminiscing my years.  
The moon shines so bright and my thoughts are so clear,  
But most of all, I wish you were here.

My eyes, heart, head, and chest,  
Looked to the East and to the West.  
Seeking, searching, unable to find,  
The true love, which is one of a kind.

Perusing through Plato's insightful pages,  
Wisdom is gained, the wisdom of sages.  
One can try to be happy, living life in vain,  
Yet, a soulmate is needed, I could then ascertain.

What to do, alone on this Earth,  
But search for the one destined from birth.  
I travelled and sought; many years did I wait,  
Until I found you in the heart shaped state.

You make me feel so utterly complete,  
From the top of my head, to the soles of my feet.  
Each hair on your head is worth a mountain of gold,  
And for Eternity it is you I wish to have and to hold.

Your taste is sweeter than honey,  
Your eyes miniature stars,  
Your arms are my sanctuary,  
And your heart's my bazaar,  
For your heart contains all;  
It contains all I could ever need,  
So, to you forever, my heart I cede.

## 19.2 The True Kaaba

My heart is a microcosm of the entirety of be-ing,  
Such that my heart has become the celestial rose,  
And the Queen Bee shall be enthroned at the center of the rose,  
So long as there is water in the sea,  
And the Earth revolves around the Sun.  
Just as I circumambulate the body of my beloved:  
The Kaaba of my soul!

## 19.3 Breathing the Name

My heart is a monastery,  
my brain an ashram—  
I retreat into these,  
leaving my body and the material world.

The eyes shut,  
the senses open.  
Take me up to the imaginal realm.  
Peace, tranquility, beauty, and love.

The Name is on the breath;  
the breath is all that is—  
all that is,  
is the name, oneness, wholeness, and eternity.

Then the dreadful downward spiral:

back to the worldly material plane—  
sadness, tears, longing for the divine.  
This is the daily grind,  
the training ground of our soul.  
Oh God: Guide us to the straight path.

**Part V**

**Interviews and Reviews**

## Chapter 20

# Review of Gregory Scofield's "Louis: The Heretic Poems"

*Maja Pašović*

I'm not solely a First Nations act  
Or Canadian act  
But a mixed breed act  
Acting out for equality.<sup>1</sup>

When life feeds you his-story(ies), embrace them with a pinch of aversion, distrust, or, possibly, hesitant acceptance; when life gives you poetry, embrace the beauty and charm of the images it creates, the messages it conveys, and the power of language that transforms and moves the boundaries of the human mind and perception. In a world drowning in capitalism, technology, and superficial *false-needs*, poetry is needed more than ever, primarily because the stories that poetry creates have the ability to resist the obstacles imposed by social, economic, and political systems, throughout time and space. History has often been told and retold for the purpose of masquerading and concealing the truth. What is more, his-story(ies) have been continually reconstructed to cater to power and the demands of more prominent and dominant sides, or forces. Unlike historians, who are the representatives of those with money and power, poets oftentimes are the unheard and suppressed voice of the poor, minorities, and/or outcasts. When it comes to the Native American communities, the idea of an individual vouching for the rights of his or her own people carries remarkable importance, primarily because members of these communities were degraded and dehumanized during the long process of the European colonization—and resulting genocide—of the

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<sup>1</sup>Gregory Scofield. *Native Canadiana: songs from the urban rez*. Vancouver: Polester Book Publishers, 1996, p. 57.

American continent. In reclaiming their history and cultural heritage, Native Americans turn to their ancestors and major historical figures from their communities, and in doing so, they come to learn of the importance that stories from the past play on the formation of their beliefs and ideas.

In his collection of poems *Louis: The Heretic Poems*, Gregory Scofield—a Métis writer from Canada—tries to provide answers to historical representations of one of the most important figures for the Métis people, Louis Riel. By channeling the spirit of the great Métis leader, and by giving him the voice history has neglected and suppressed, Scofield turns Riel into something more than just a historical figure symbolizing resistance against the forces of colonization. The Louis Riel that emerges from the pages of Scofield's text bears a remarkable resemblance to any number of figures, such as the revolutionary, the visionary, and the artist, however, Scofield goes far beyond that, lifting Riel to heights we do not get from history books. Namely, the image of Louis Riel we get from Scofield's verse is also that of a father, brother, son, friend, husband, and a lover. Scofield's poems invite us to approach and to see Riel and the history of the Métis people not through a jaded, stereotypical lens, but rather to broaden our horizons and to listen to what the history of the Aboriginal people has to tell us. Scofield masterfully juxtaposes various written sources: from the Bible to Riel's diaries and poems, from the written or spoken accounts of political and institutional characters to the written testimonies of Riel's friends, family, and his lovers, all of them portraying the tremendous amount of respect, love, and support he would get in the times of misfortune and hardship. Through the use of intertextuality, Scofield manages to reaffirm Métis identities, and to confirm rhetorical differences that underlie the Native American literary tradition as opposed to the Western literary canon. Scofield's outstanding verbal precision, conciseness, and code-switching place the readers in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal settings and mind-frames, and in doing so, he revives history and stories that have been swept under the pen of those in power.

What makes this book rather unusual is that the poems do not follow the conventional poetic style of narration and structure, but they fall more in the line of traditional storytelling. On the surface, Scofield's work falls into the category of the poetic genre, however, one must bear in mind that the use of a specific genre is a concept very debatable in Native American literary circles. As Eric Gary Anderson explains, "the concept of genre is a way of not only categorizing written texts by type... but also evaluating the 'literary' quality and 'cultural' worth of the texts in question... Non-Native writings do not always strictly adhere to the dictates of a single genre or a single notion

of literary canon”,<sup>2</sup> because “a genre is significantly less important a measure of American Indian literature than community. Weaver, for example, claims that Native writers reflect and shape Native identity and community in a reciprocal relationship with their communities”,<sup>3</sup> not with a specific genre. With the constant switching from prose to poetry, poetry to prose, Scofield aims not to separate genres one from another, but to emphasize the interdependence of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal histories, and most importantly, the interdependence of written and oral tradition, which is magnificently portrayed in “Epitaph”, the closing poem of the book:

Be sweet to my words: and listen  
When I write you with a golden  
Pen.

Be not swayed: and give thoughtful pause  
When I speak to you with an iridescent  
Voice.<sup>4</sup>

What stands out in the poem is the sense of inversion we get between these two stanzas, which could replace each other’s positions without changing the poem’s powerful and inviting tone and meaning. Scofield’s use of the nouns “pen” and “voice” highlights the interplay between oral and written traditions stretching throughout the entire work. Not only that, but “pen” and “voice” are placed in stark opposition, pointing to the ever present question of what carries more significance, the written or spoken word? With the first stanza taken from Riel’s love poem written to his wife Marguerite, where the written word is golden, Scofield introduces his own lines, making the spoken word more lively and more imposing than the written one, for the voice is transformed into a concept embodying an almost bedazzling, “iridescent”<sup>5</sup> power through its eternal stories. While pen possesses the unalienable power to express one’s deepest thoughts and ideas in the most profound way, voice has the power to transform our embodied experience into awareness and knowledge of our ancestry and land, or even knowledge of how to bring together reality and imagination, or the exterior and the interior. With storytelling, one has more space and freedom to deconstruct the events from the past and present, and most importantly, to establish a more

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<sup>2</sup>Eric Gary Anderson. “Situating American Indian Poetry: Place, Community, and the Question of Genre”. In: *Speak to Me Words: Essays on Contemporary American Indian Poetry*. Ed. by Dean Rader and Janice Gould. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2003, pp. 34–55, p. 39.

<sup>3</sup>Anderson, op. cit., p. 42.

<sup>4</sup>Gregory Scofield. *Lois: The Heretic Poems*. Gibsons, BC: Nightwood Editions, 2011, p. 88.

<sup>5</sup>Scofield, op. cit.

intimate bond with the audience, which lacks in the written medium because we do not have a living storyteller whose mastery lies primarily in the ability to tell stories through a set of bodily gestures, and in the ability to establish a more intimate bond with an audience.

The way we tell stories changes along with the changing world, and in the Native American tradition stories are viewed as receptacles of already existing stories, of memories that communities and its members carry within themselves. In *Louis: The Heretic Poems*, Scofield does a very interesting thing by merging his own stories with the stories, memories, and voices of other people—both Natives and non-Natives—to the point that they become one. As readers, we are often unable to distinguish between the poetic voices, which only heightens the intensity between different historical perspectives, making us follow and question the stories history tells us. What makes Scofield's language and form original is the ability to paint history through a mode of storytelling hidden behind poetry and its images. As readers, we become engaged into an entire storytelling process, for every poem stands as a new story about the Métis heritage and its hero, Riel. Scofield manages to tie together his personal voice with the voices of the Métis community, and in doing so, he brings his audience into a world comprised of stories never heard before, stories whose melodies are sweeter than the ones we have heard already. Each poem in the book is an attempt to rewrite the history of Louis Riel, but most of all, it is an attempt to prove the importance of storytelling, and to transgress its supposed limitations. Using the images of weaving, food, nature, plants, and clocks, Scofield reclaims his own heritage and tradition, giving back the neglected aspects of Riel's life to the Native and non-Native collective memory. All of these images are reminiscent of storytelling: stories can be woven into a coherent whole; stories can nourish both our bodies and minds; stories are created from the land and they go back to the land or nature; just like plants, stories have to be nurtured in order to survive; and finally, stories change through time as our perception of the world changes; stories can be short-lived or they can last eternally, depending on whether or not they are passed from one generation to another.

To tell stories from the past, especially stories about history's most notorious figures, one has to delve into different directions in search of correct answers. For Native Americans, this search for answers can be rather complex due to the fact that their histories, more precisely only portions of their histories, were written down by Euro-American white authors, with most of them either neglecting the truth, or striving to present Native Americans as deprived of their own culture and heritage. In *Louis: The Heretic Poems*, Scofield challenges our perceptions of historical reality and historical knowledge, by giving voice to Louis Riel, one of the most discussed personalities in Canadian history. However, it is not merely through voice that Scofield makes Riel

alive. He brings him back to life, and makes him closer to us through depictions of Riel as a man devoted to his ancestors, his wife and friends, and to God. Through a juxtaposition of multiple historical accounts and Riel's testimonies, Scofield strengthens Métis cultural, social, and linguistic integrity. What is even more important is that Scofield unfolds the deep buried treasure of the humanity of the Métis, making them into non-marginalized subjects who demand truthful representations of their culture and history. Using his craftsmanship in the art of storytelling, Scofield, through the voice of Riel, and many other Métis figures, blends history into myth, and myth into history. As with most storytellers, Scofield's fear is not that his representation of history behind Riel might not prove to be as effective, but that his stories and the stories of other Native American authors and storytellers will, decades or centuries later, again be "put in a box, a poorly chosen box. One that is in constant quarrel over size and shape".<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Scofield, op. cit., p. 86.